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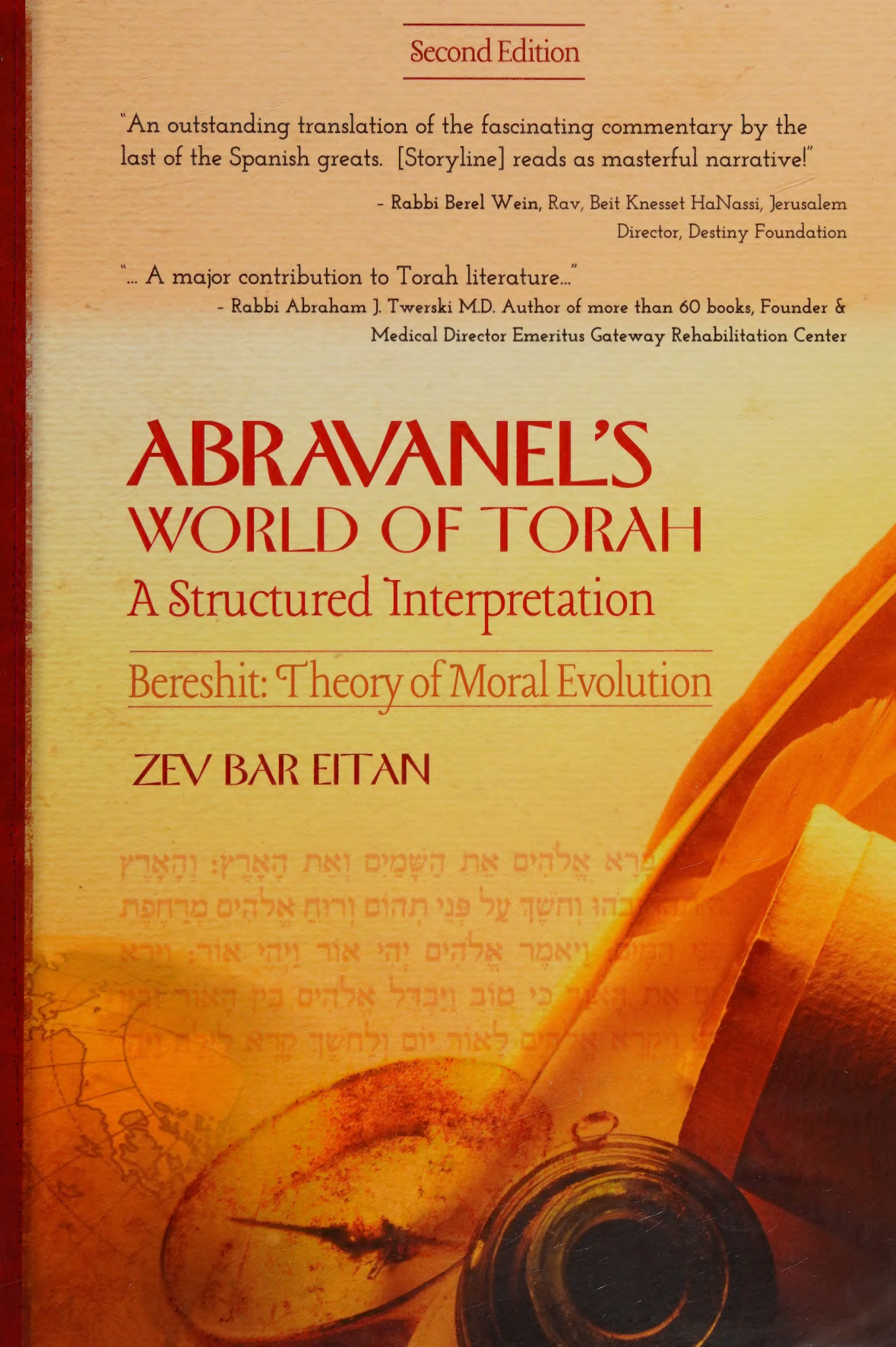
ABRAVANEL'S WORLD OF TORAH

A Structured Interpretation

Bereshit: Theory of Moral Evolution

ZEV BAR EITAN



Exploration and discovery—these are Abravanel's hallmarks. With unequaled passion for probing Biblical mysteries, a quest begins. Limitless gems of eternal wisdom enticingly sparkle at every destination.

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(Continued on back flap)

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DEDICATION

This *sefer* is dedicated to my first *Roshei Yeshiva*, *Rabbeim* and their families: Rabbi Marvin Hier and Rabbi Moshe Meiselman at Yeshiva University of Los Angeles (formerly The Menachem Begin School of Jewish Studies); Rabbis Nathan Kamenetsky, Yitzchak Shurin, Shaya Karlinsky, Yitzchak Hirshfeld, Yitzchak Feigenbaum and Alan Kimchi at Shapell's/Darchei Noam in Jerusalem. Your warmth, dedication and enthusiasm encouraged me to embark on the in-depth study of Jewish texts.

Foremost, the dedication belongs to my esteemed *Rebbe, HaRav HaGaon* R' Yisrael Shurin (1918–2007) זצ"ל and his illustrious family. There are no words or way to adequately express my admiration, affection and respect for the Rav. His demeanor – so thoroughly and amicably *Litvish* – endeared him to those whose lives he touched. Rav Shurin made a lasting impression on his family, students, readers and congregants. His absence saddens the heart.

I cherish those twenty five years under Rav Shurin's guidance and tutelage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rabbis, colleagues and students have graciously encouraged me to undertake this writing project. Thank you for your constructive criticism and advice.

Sizeable segments of this sefer have been reviewed by Rabbi Yisrael Herczeg. His Abravanel expertise and extensive editing experience greatly enhanced it.

Rabbi Doron Beckerman has been my editor from the outset. His professionalism, creativity and stamina made an indelible mark on every single page.

In recognition of your tireless effort and patience, I am most indebted.

Ms. Tichye Krakowski is the copy editor of this work. Diligent, painstaking, and forbearing, she marshaled the entire manuscript, readying it for print. Thank you – with a grateful tip of the hat.

Preface to the Third Printing

I take great pleasure to present this Third Reprint of *Abravanel's World of Torah: Bereshit.*

Special thanks to my gracious hosts during the 2013 book promotion tour.

Several readers provided excellent critical, grammatical, and editing suggestions, and to them, as well, I extend my gratitude.

Zev Bar Eitan
Nof Ayalon, Israel
Iyar 5774
May 2014

Preface to the Second Printing

It is my pleasure to present this Second Reprint (2nd Ed.) of *Abravanel's World of Torah: Bereshit.* Readers will benefit from a substantial number of emendations in text, style, content and design. While the main body of the text is largely unchanged, it reads smoother than the first printing published in 2012.

In great part, S. Kim Glassman's typesetting expertise contributed to the improvement of this printing. Gratitude is also extended to many people who hosted, assisted and participated in the 2012 book launch in Israel, Canada and the U.S.A. Your warm encouragement and reception encourage me to continue with this important project. Thank you.

Z.B.E.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Kind Letter XI

Foreword XIII

Introduction XVII

THE PARSHIYOT

Creation: Failure to Thrive (*Bereshit*) 1

A Family Afloat (*Noach*) 101

The Remnant (*Lech Lecha*) 151

The Testimony (*Vayera*) 205

Home for Good (*Chayei Sarah*) 265

Color War (*Toldot*) 291

Storied Ladder (*Vayetze*) 325

A Hurt Home (*Vayishlach*) 357

Foul Disappearance (*Vayeshev*) 397

Paroah's Ace (*Miketz*) 431

Tryst on the Nile (*Vayigash*) 473

Promise (*Vaychi*) 502

Glossary 535

About the Author 541

Map of Yaakov-Esav Encounter 542

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Rabbi Yitzchak Shurin
Rosh Midrasha
Mrs. Lynn Finson
Educational Director

It is a great honor and pleasure to write this letter of bracha for my mechutan, Rabbi Zev Bar Eitan, *shlita*. Rav Zev and myself have been close friends for over thirty years, first when he was a student at Shapell College, and then when he went *Lifnai v'Lifnim*, and studied under my revered father, Harav Yisrael Shurin *zt"l*, from whom he received ordination. Rav Zev spent many years absorbing my father's broad style of learning, as well as interacting with him on a regular basis. As it says, *"Greater is the one who serves than the one who learns."* During this time, he also received a wealth of knowledge my father regularly shared - living Torah - about the *Gedolei Torah* of the past generations, many of whom he knew personally.

Unfortunately, until now, this monumental work, Don Yitzchak Abravanel's commentary on the Torah, has not received its proper place on Torah bookshelves. My illustrious grandfather, Harav Yaakov Kaminetsky, *zt"l*, shared with me on a number of occasions when we studied the Abravanel together that the Abravanel was an original thinker and approached difficult passages in *Tanach* in his own unique way. Rav Yaakov added on one occasion that people mistakenly think that Abravanel was just a commentator on Tanach. In reality, however, he was part of our long Halachic Mesorah, and as proof, Rav Yaakov cited the Rama in Hilchos Talmud Torah (246:21) who quotes the Abravanel. The Kesef Mishna on the Rambam Laws of Brachos (3: 8) relates that the illustrious Maran Pasi *z"l* raised a question on the Rambam "In a public forum in front of chachamim and sofrim, and amongst them was the great eagle (*Hanesher Hagadol*) Harav Yitzchak Abravanel."

Therefore, the Torah community owes appreciation to Rav Zev for making the unique and original work of the Abravanel accessible to the English speaking public. As an outstanding teacher of many years, in the city of Efrat, Rav Zev toiled both to elucidate the commentary of Abravanel as well as to present it to the public in a way that makes it more readable and enjoyable. He wisely did not translate it literally, but rather presented the reader with Abravanel's ideas on the Parsha and also added a modern touch to make it more relevant for today's readers.

I wish him, with Hashem's help, much success in this endeavor, and may Hashem continue to give him strength in spreading words of Torah throughout Klal Yisrael.

Rabbi Yitzchak Shurin

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MORE PRAISE FOR "ABRAVANEL'S WORLD OF TORAH"

The Torah commentary of *Don* Yitzhak Abravanel has been revered for several hundred years. However, many people prefer a brief insight, and do not have the requisite patience to study Abravanel's thorough and painstaking commentary. As a result, Abravanel has not received his due. Abravanel is innovative and courageous, sometimes offering interpretations of Torah that send one reeling.

The serious Torah student will welcome the accessibility to Abravanel that Zev Bar Eitan provides. It is a major contribution to Torah literature.

–Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.
author of more than 60 books,
Founder & Medical Director Emeritus Gateway Rehabilitation Center

Abravanel's commentary, particularly on *Chumash*, is enormously useful to anyone who takes the *devar Hashem* seriously. Almost alone among major *meforshim*, Abravanel consistently attempts to fill in the details that we long to know about. The sheer length of his comments, however, coupled with difficult Hebrew syntax, means that Abravanel is often overlooked.

Zev Bar Eitan gets us over the hurdles. In the passages that I have seen, he not only makes Abravanel more accessible, but makes him come alive through a lively, contemporary treatment.

–Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein
prolific and featured writer, Co-Founder of Cross-Currents

I have seen the book *Abravanel's World of Torah* on Bereshit by Zev Bar Eitan. The author has produced a masterful rendition of the comprehensive commentary of the Abravanel. Although not a word for word translation, the author captures the intent and spirit of the Abravanel's commentary in a lucid, free flowing and interesting manner.

This book will benefit both those who are unable to learn the Abravanel in the original Hebrew and those who want to better understand the Abravanel through this capsulized English rendition.

I commend the author on a job well done and look forward to the continuation of this work to its completion on the entire Torah and perhaps also on all Tanach.

–Rabbi Zev Leff
Rabbi of Moshav Matityahu, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshiva Gedola Matityahu

FOREWORD

Don Yitzchak Abravanel (1437–1508), illustrious scion of King David, was undoubtedly one of the seminal Biblical expositors in history. His groundbreaking work marked a watershed event in the rich annals of Biblical commentary. Despite its distinction as the first thematic running commentary of *Tanach,* it has never been translated from the original Hebrew. Indeed, translating his entire encyclopedic work would be a mammoth undertaking and an extraordinary achievement. This book provides the English speaking public with an opportunity to understand and explore Abravanel's thought and outlook as it pertains to *Sefer Bereshit.*

Generally, studying Abravanel[1] has been unpopular in some circles, undiscovered in others. But make no mistake. Abravanel's religious commitment, brilliance, and credentials have never been challenged. His writings, while remarkably original, bear the hallmark of unshakable – even fierce – commitment to traditional *weltanschauung.* The fact that he has not enjoyed the renown, popularity, or influence of such titans as Rashi and Ramban is likely due, in no small part, to practical considerations.

Barrages of questions introducing each passage tend to rattle, frustrate, and dishearten all but the most tenacious students. Copious sourcing and referencing of both Jewish and Gentile derivation can tire readers.

This largely unheralded classicist does not indulge in skeletal snippets; his approach is methodical and incisive. His periphrasis adds flavor and nuance that gorgeously weave Scripture, *Chazal,* and more. Commitment and patience are, to be sure, prerequisites that handsomely reward effort.

A Renaissance man, Abravanel was not interested in immediate gratification. He relished time spent with novel ideas, savoring quality exchanges. One gets the distinct impression that the pursuit of Torah with colleagues and his cadre of dedicated students anchored a tumultuous life, while running the finances of the Iberian Peninsula[2] was nothing more than a pesky, if invigorating, distraction. Abravanel wrote for an appreciative audience well versed

1. Some pronounce the name Avrabanel or Abarbanel.
2. He was the Royal Treasurer to the Portuguese and Spanish kings prior to the 1483 and 1492 expulsions.

enough to facilitate high-level dialogue. Daunting for fluent Hebrew readers, what can be said about those whose command of the *lingua sancta* is shakier?

Truly, Abravanel deserves a wider readership, regardless of religious training and background. This volume endeavors to bridge a chasm and will hopefully stimulate greater interest in his works through its innovative structuring of format and interpretation of content, adapting both for contemporary tastes and sensibilities.

Structure: There are twelve titled *parshiyot* (chapters). Each is subdivided into seven *aliyot*, with the first *aliyah* verse in bold print. Footnotes allow readers to delve further into topics of particular interest. *Tanach* sources are referenced by classical Biblical chapter and verse. Note that *parshiyot* and *aliyot* are utilized as markers (e.g. "see *Parashat Noach*, second *aliyah*" et al). For brevity's sake I omit the introductory questions that invariably appear at the start of each topic in the original, proceeding directly to Abravanel's *pshat*. Generally, I have similarly left out the prefatory references and critiques of earlier commentators. While these scattered, scintillating mini-essays (e.g. an overview treatment of blessings introducing Yitzchak's benediction of Yaakov, or a discussion of dream theory preceding Yosef's interpretation to Paroah) are not bundled apart from the main bodied commentary, effort was made to indicate excursus material (as well as topic shifts) within *aliyot* by the insertion of triple section signs (§§§).

Interpretation: Abravanel's fifteenth century perspective encompasses and integrates diverse religious and secular observations and knowledge. My goal is to identify and retain the flavor of his conclusions, explaining them in more familiar, perhaps even anachronistic, terminology. On occasion I take the initiative to elaborate; other times I edit. It would be flattering to believe that *Don* Abravanel would have approved of my rendition. At least, I have aspired to slip into Abravanel's head, as it were, and capture his Torah outlook.

Transliterations follow the familiar methodology of standard modern Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation. No particular translation of the Biblical text has been adopted. When rendered into the vernacular, verses (in single quotes) may be literal, figurative or emotive depending on Abravanel's understanding. I try to track and shadow his evocations on the subject at hand. While this *sefer* reads smoothly on its own, readers may want to keep an open *Bereshit* at their side since uninterrupted text is not provided.

Much effort has been put forth to create an Abravanel companion. Those interested in delving into its original Hebrew should find each *aliyah* and *parashah* a fairly close, parallel read. Clearly not a linear or literal translation, it does follow his text methodically. Assuming the structural parameters delineated above, rarely do I break order or rank for more than a scant paragraph or two. An exception is made for the first chapter. By far the longest in the original, its subject matter covering cosmology, ontology, epistemology, theology, metaphysics et al is vast. Basically, my objective therein is to provide the fundamentals of vocabulary and background for the balance of the *sefer* which presupposes a Jewish understanding of man's dual nature and key insights regarding supernatural mechanics, such as miracles and *malachim* (heavenly facilitators or angels). *Parashat Noach*'s genealogical chart has been moved to the end of its chapter to maintain the book's stylistic consistency.

An important disclaimer about this *sefer*: Learning Torah is serious and Abravanel was not frivolous. Nonetheless, I do on occasion choose words or evoke images that are south of conventionality. A twist of levity with a tad of sassy spunk is meant to be light-spirited. The fact is one person's playful phraseology is another's cause for recoil. If I have drifted beyond the pale, I take responsibility and apologize. It certainly is not my interest or intention to misrepresent Abravanel. Like a sorcerer's apprentice, I may overreach.

Furthermore, it would be erroneous to chalk up my mistakes in judgment to what some modernists call '*govah haEnayim*' (an approach, in my opinion that queerly inflates, deflates, and inverts the writer and subject matter) when dealing with *Tanach* narratives and personalities. I am not so inclined. Again, apprentices are wont to err.

Sefer Bereshit, encompassing as many facets as it does, covers a fantastic range. My goal has been to present a sampling of the Torah's multifaceted hues. If only this *sefer* could brush a single stroke of its luster…

Preserving opinions and ideas of the great master's novel and encyclopedic commentary on *Sefer Bereshit*, coupled with accomplishing the educational goals set forth, has been a challenging and demanding undertaking. Friends and colleagues who read sections of the *sefer* sought clarification: "Is this Bar Eitan or Abravanel? Where does one begin and the other leave off?"

There is a short answer. The pages that follow are intended to present Abravanel. It purports to flow closely and consistently with his thinking.

Readers will not find prefaces such as: "Abravanel asks," "Abravanel has this to say" or "Abravanel believed," followed by a translated quote. The entire *sefer*'s tone, content, and rhythm are intended to echo and resound as the original. As with classic art, the best a copyist can aim for is proximity to the original. Approaching classic literary works such as this means striving for close approximation. It is, as the subtitle suggests, a structured interpretation. Also note that the *sefer* and *parashah* titles are my innovation.

I pray that readers will find this delicate blend pleasing. *B'ezrat* Hashem this will spawn greater interest, awareness, and appreciation of *Don* Yitzchak Abravanel's writings.

INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, *Tanach* has been universally revered and beloved. Jew and Gentile have pored over its pages, savoring its wisdom. Traditional Jewish commentaries spanning the centuries proclaim their passion by their labor's fruit lining each page's margins. Like all Torah study, *Tanach* exegesis is a constant endeavor of discovery.

There are fundamental rules and approaches that have been handed down to posterity by the Sages. Exceptionally talented commentators toiled and left lasting imprints on the *Tanach*. After the saintly Talmudists and Geonic luminaries, Rashi, Ramban, Radak (among countless others) led the way, instructing and writing masterfully for students to this very day. *Don* Yitzchak Abravanel זצ"ל (1437–1508) entered into that category of teachers who revolutionized *Tanach* scholarship when he wrote his trailblazing commentary in the fifteenth century.

An advisor, confidante, and treasurer to royalty, *Don* Abravanel served the Portuguese and Spanish kings before the 1483 and 1492 expulsions of the Jews. Among other places, one catches a biographical glimpse of Abravanel's opulence and repose in *Sefer Yehoshua*'s[1] introduction. A life with every imaginable comfort crashed when King Ferdinand and his wife Isabel came to power. Groundswells of religious fanaticism and anti-Semitism gnawed and tarnished a Golden Era. Forced conversions, murder, and pillage overtook hundreds of thousands of Abravanel's co-religionists. Spurning the insidious dispensation by Spain's king to remain cloistered and protected within the palace, Abravanel preferred to accompany his disgorged brethren east.

Arriving in Renaissance Italy, Abravanel resumed prominent city-state governmental positions and, of course, his writing. During an illustrious lifetime he mastered a vast array of timeless traditional Jewish commentaries and philosophic works seasoned with an impressive list of secular Jewish histories, Greek and Christian writings. Brandishing an inimitable quill and exquisite encyclopedic recall, he penned one of the foremost Biblical commentaries of all time.

---

1. שלו הייתי בביתי בית והון נחלת אבות בית מלא ברכת ה' בלשבונ"ה המהוללה עיר ואם במלכות פורטוגא"ל, שם צוה ה' את הברכה באסמי העושר והכבוד לפני ותענוגות בני האדם, בניתי לי בתים ועליות מרווחות, ביתי בית ועד לחכמים... בביתי ובחומותי הון עתק... (הקדמת האברבנאל לספר יהושע, עמ' ב')

Many novelties set Abravanel's writings apart. One of his hallmarks is the utilization of a question and answer dialectic. The questions in *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) and *Nevi'im* (major and minor prophets) total two thousand seven hundred and seventy seven (2,777) by my count. That astounding figure approaches three thousand if we add *Mayene HaYeshuah* (his commentary to *Sefer Daniyel*) and scores of other untallied "smaller queries."

Abravanel himself offers a rationale for his stylistic choice. After raising forty-two questions on the verse, 'This is the history [engendered by] heaven and earth from when they were created', he writes: "After all of these comments that arouse the sleepy from slumber, I will arise and allow my mind to meander, seeking to comprehend a path, or paths, in accordance with the *parashah* and accounting for all its verses, such that all questions will be resolved. There will not remain an objection or doubt in the Torah's pure words. Furthermore, this will be done in a manner such that reason will not conflict with faith. The Torah was not intended to deviate from its true and rational form. Verily Hashem's ways are straight and do not contort."[2]

If the man was a gadfly, he certainly was a most complex one. Another feature is Abravanel's analytical and integrative approach. *Tanach*'s vastness ensures that there will always be topics of interest that have not been previously discussed, let alone analyzed. Throughout this tour de force countless subjects are broached. On the Torah's very first verse, he writes: "And now I have been forced to explain these (twelve) words since I have not seen adequate comment by any other writer."[3] His observation concerning creation's firmament and upper waters: "One should not be astonished that our Sages have endeavored to elucidate these esoteric subjects utilizing metaphor and riddles...this is the preferred method of the ancients – Jewish or Gentile... Co-religionists are (misconstruing parables and thus) misled (with regards to important fundamentals of creations)."[4] Thus Abravanel does not content

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2. ואחרי ההערות האלה המקיצות נרדמים, אקומה נא ואסובבה בעיוני, ואבקשה בינה דרך או דרכים כפי הפרשה ויישוב פסוקיה, באופן יותרו השאלות כולם ולא ישאר ערעור או ספק בדברי תורת ה' תמימה, ויהיה זה באופן לא יחלוק השכל על הדת, ולא תיטה תורה מהמושכל האמיתי, כי ישרים דרכי ה' אין בהם נפתל ועקש (עמ' פה)
3. והנה הוצרכתי לבאר המילות האלה, לפי שלא ראיתי בדברי המפרשים דיבור מספיק בהם כאשר עם לבבי (עמ' יג)
4. ואין להפלא מאשר היו חכמינו זכרונם לברכה מדברים בדרושים העמוקים האלה במשלים וחידות...כי זה היה מנהג הקדומים כולם גם מחכמי האומות...ושאנשים מבני ישראל נפלו בהם בדעות בלתי אמיתיות. (עמ' מו)

himself with merely writing his opinion. He quotes earlier commentaries and unabashedly demonstrates the flaws in their exegeses.

Don Yitzchak's passion for truth is manifest. And proceeding gingerly was not Abravanel's style. He is not averse to giving credit where credit is due, while just as often his quest for setting the record straight bellows. Earlier commentators are shunted aside in the most acerbic, merciless language imaginable. On the first *parashah*'s topic of darkness in verses about creation, he wrote "that earlier commentators are all dark and not light!"[5] Abravanel expresses deep admiration for Maimonides, but even he is not spared biting criticism. Again in the creation story Abravanel has this riposte: "And after I beg forgiveness and permission to speak as is wont for a disciple before his master, it seems to me that the Rav (Rambam) has transgressed the Torah's commandments not to add or detract!"[6]

Contemporary Jewish opinion likely finds this brash style too revolutionary.[7] It is especially the case when he offers alternative approaches to Talmudic sages' interpretations. By way of illustration, a verse in *Sefer Shmuel* attests to Shmuel *HaNavi* reaching old age: 'And it was when Shmuel grew old.'[8] In keeping with the straightforward meaning of the *passuk,* and in stark contrast to Seder Olam (*tanna* Rabbi Yose ben Chalafta), Abravanel posits that he indeed achieved longevity. "Do not wonder that I have rejected Seder Olam's opinion. The Radak has done the same in *Sefer Shoftim* as often does the Ralbag."[9]

By no means is his position vis-à-vis the Sages roundly disrespectful or irreverent. Commonly Abravanel defers to tradition. In his commentary on *Daniyel*, he writes, "Thus says Rashi of blessed memory and his approach if it has been passed down in their hands as a tradition then we unquestionably accept it."[10]

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5. על כן אמרתי שהפירושים האלה כולם הם חושך ולא אור. (עמ' כג)
6. ואחרי בקשת המחילה והרשות כתלמיד המדבר לפני רבו, נראה לי שעבר הרב פה על לא תוסיף עליו ולא תגרע ממנו (עמ' כד)
7. In numerous places Abravanel provides ample justification for this. See: שמות עמוד קפ״ו, רכ״ז, ישעיהו קמ״א
8. *Shmuel* I 8:1
9. ואל תתמה בנטותי מדברי סדר עולם... (שמואל עמ' רב)
10. וכן פירש רש״י ז״ל והדעת ההוא אם הוא קבלה בידיהם... (מעיני הישועה עמ' שסד)

Perhaps more striking than Abravanel's innovative and unabashed style is his quest for maverick exegetical integration. Having seemingly endless supplies of classic and secular sources at his fingertips, he likens himself to a grain gleaner. Introducing the *akedah,* he says: "I have certainly seen the commentators' words and studied their ways. One contemporary sage has written a praiseworthy, sapphire-studded commentary on this topic alone. I am like one who walks behind harvesters. I take stalks that I like and the displeasing ones I reject."[11] This comment is not flippant or hasty. Whether or not one accepts or rejects his final analysis, this is certain – he has given the matter due consideration. At the end of the day, to be colloquial, he always called it the way he saw it. And he saw things uniquely – full of pathos, mind, and soul.

The thrill of Abravanel's work is multifaceted. Language, diction, style and content all mix effortlessly to teach *Tanach* in a pristine and refined way. Mini-essays covering basic Jewish issues and fundamentals are interspersed within the *parshiyot*. In the opening chapter, the discussion turns to the Garden of Eden. Was it metaphorical or literal? In the face of Adam's sin, he dissects man's inclination for good versus evil.

These are a smattering of Abravanel's topical treatises:

- Talking snakes: Fact or fairy tale?
- Kayin's fratricide and subsequent punishment: Anatomy of a Murder
- First generations' longevity: How do we do the math?
- Noach's flood: How did a civilization go awry?
- Tower of Bavel: The pull of possessions
- The patriarchs' trials and tribulations, particularly the *akedah*: Human change
- Rivkah's two polar opposite sons and her plan to wrest Esav's blessings: nature vs. nurture?
- Yaakov's ladder dream: A refugee's pilot prophecy
- Matriarchs and twelve tribes: Is there Jewish astrology?
- The sale of Yosef: A vexing moral issue

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11. וראה ראיתי דברי המחברים והמפרשים בענייניה. וגם אחד מחכמי הדור כתב עליה בלבד אמירה משובחת מעולפת ספירים. ואני אלך אחרי הקוצרים ואלקטה בשבלים, ואת הטוב אקבל מדעותיהם ואת הרע הבלתי נכון בעיני לא אקבל (עמ' רסה)

While perhaps not readily perceived, each episode provides distinct, object lessons contributing in one way or another to the Jewish Persona and Mystique. Besides grappling with *Sefer Bereshit*'s human elements, there are also theological and ontological facets:

- How does Hashem operate His universe?
- What is the nature and function of *malachim*?
- What is the nature of man?
- What is a Jew?
- How does Judaism set Jews apart?

Taken as a whole, Abravanel's writings are a quintessential Jewish experience. This magnum opus has something for everyone. Jaded students who have felt frustration, discomfort, or ambivalence with other approaches should find this book refreshing, exciting, and satisfying. Burning issues and questions deserve mature and sophisticated responses. Don't expect cliché or superficiality. Abravanel unapologetically applies himself to tackling discordant or baffling passages (e.g. *Parashat Vayetze* explicitly recording that Yaakov hated Leah) along with overarching themes (such as Avraham's religious impulses and growth) and piquant motifs (like *Tanach* section titles – Torah, *Nevi'im*, and *Ketuvim* – as indicative of their essence).

I am unaware of any other commentator fired by such intellectual curiosity – a thirst that defied limits. (I've frequently urged students to read his introduction to *Sefer Yehoshua* as it lays succinct groundwork for appreciating *Tanach*'s gradations, functions and aims.)

A doughty individualist, Abravanel writes as much about himself in *Sefer Shmuel*. "What more can I say? I alone without another have investigated this topic, seeing that no predecessor has found it a burning issue. Neither Mishnaic nor Talmudic Sages. How much this saddens and pains me! Therefore I suggest: Brethren – listen to me. Heed what Hashem has placed on my tongue and I will present it to you."[12]

Sometimes new ground is broken using common sense and/or non-Jewish sources. Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Josephus, Christian exegetical sources – it didn't seem to matter. (In my taking notes for this *sefer* I marveled at bibliographical sources that would be the envy of writers having the benefit

12. כל הענינים הגדולים האלה אשר באו בספר שמואל לא זכרם עזרא... (שמואל עמ' קסג)

of today's most extensive research libraries.) Theories of psychology helped him understand Yaakov's ladder prophecy.

The gleaner had a sharp eye trained for knowledge, peeled for truth. Abravanel's gift for posterity was brought about by the diligence of one panning for gold in still waters, exhibiting a coalminer's grit, digging depths to illuminate our universe's dark and dingy places.

There is a saying that goes:[13] "A dwarf who sits on a giant's shoulders commands panoramic vistas." What happens when a giant straddles another giant's shoulders? How far can he see? *Don* Yitzchak Abravanel was a Torah giant. He mastered *Tanach*, both Talmuds, *Midrashim* (*Rabbah, Tanchuma, Yalkut* and others), and *Zohar*. Classic medieval-period rabbis such as Rashi, Chisdai, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban, Ralbag, Ran, Radak, Kuzari and Albo were his life-breath as were the Geonic works that preceded the *Rishonim*. Finally, it is evident that Abravanel regularly corresponded and conversed with contemporary scholars and students.

Don Abravanel's breadth strikes the reader in every passage, and this trenchant circumspect thinker resounded with poetic flair. Deservedly, his place is on every Jewish and scholarly bookshelf; he is indispensable. The basis and foundation that his comments provide are bedrock. Readers cannot but help feeling enriched and uplifted from the time invested learning his work.

This *sefer* grants students and teachers of all backgrounds a succinct yet comprehensive digest. Upon completion of this book, students will, I hope, have acquired a serious and respectable overview of *Bereshit* as seen through Abravanel's loupe. My goal is for this *parshanut* to complement and supplement *Chumash*-based English books of *drush* and *hashkafah* that have enjoyed popularity for many decades and centuries.

Without a doubt, translations such as the classic *Me'am Lo'ez* have become a fixture in Jewish homes, and for good reason. Homily speaks to the heart, inspiring and uplifting readers. Nonetheless, the Sages[14] have taught that the Torah is meant to have a *Pardes* [15] sequence. The following pages are, I intend,

13. See the preface to *Megillat Esther's* commentary on Rambam's *Sefer HaMitzvot*, citing Rabbi Yeshaya of Trani in the name of a non-Jewish wise man.
14. See *Zohar Chadash, Tikkunim* vol. II pg. 71a
15. '*Pardes*' is an acronym alluding to the four methods of Biblical interpretation: '*Pshat* (plain)', '*Remez* (symbolic)', '*Drash* (homiletic)', '*Sod* (esoteric)'

a meaty repast. Getting through the Abravanel's works is, though, a labor of love. Pupils and academics are past due in opening and rereading them.

Finally, this is not intended to be, nor can it be, a substitution for the original. Inevitably, something gets lost in translation. Beyond the obvious drawback of readers losing out on the classicist's nuance, flavor, and fragrance, something else is missing. Readers of the Abravanel's original, classic Hebrew experience the expansion of their minds that is associated with intense Torah study. He is meant to be studied as if the participant sits in the great *Rebbe*'s classroom, transported to the sacred ancient study halls of yesteryear. When the bell signals a break, acolytes walk down the hallway with their master. Tutorials resume quickly and end only late at night as stars dazzle brilliantly overhead. Dark does not mark the end of the day for that is when the protective mentor walks disciples back to their living quarters, schmoozing and *kibbitzing* all the way.

Abravanel opens up Worlds of Torah, ever illuminating universal horizons and vistas of truth.

Nof Ayalon, Israel
Tamuz 5772
July 2012

CHAPTER ONE

PARASHAT BERESHIT

CREATION: FAILURE TO THRIVE

First *aliyah*

Day One

'With the beginning the Almighty created heaven and earth.'

Bereshit begins with familiar but baffling mystical words. Many, if not all of them have multiple nuances and meanings. Nonetheless, it is crucial to offer working definitions if the reader is to make it to the first rung of Biblical understanding. An axiom: Verses can and do stand coherently by themselves.

There is another reason to give these finely honed words precise import. Tucked in those meticulously crafted Hebrew letters and spaces are important metaphysical and physical universal fundamentals. For example, what can be gleaned about the Creator, creation's purpose, and the seven day sequence? Given the key role of *malachim*[1] in Hashem's creation, where is explicit mention made of them? A close investigation of the Torah's tight phraseology provides a wealth of information on these heady matters.

For starters, the following approach provides proper perspective. The Almighty working alone commenced an *ex nihilo* creation process by creating the sources for heaven and earth. The Creator subsequently employed and utilized the heavenly dimension (*malachim* and the initial formation

1. Angels (henceforth called *malach* in singular and *malachim* in plural) are a key *Tanach* subject, though much confusion and misunderstanding surrounds them. Part of the perplexity stems from their pure intellectual and non corporeal constitution. At this juncture it is best to provide a short, workable definition, addressing interesting nitty-gritty aspects as they arise. Created on the first day, *malachim* in various forms and contexts are a routine bill of Jewish fare mentioned dozens of times throughout *Tanach*'s twenty four books. For present purposes, they are a kind of non-physical energy and bustle. Heavenly powerhouses or facilitators, *malachim* also act as couriers transmitting Divine communication to prophets. (See Abravanel to *Yeshayahu* 6:2)

of heavenly stuff, or energy, enveloping the earth) as well as the primordial earthly elements (fire, air, water and earth) to compose basic ambient physical matter. Thus on what is referred to as Day One, the Creator made out of absolutely nothing a crude and practically indistinguishable mix of heavenly and (separately) earthly material. Potent stuff. Untangled and unleashed in the succeeding five days of creation, it contained tremendous building and forging potential. A genome for the universe, so to speak, unraveled. Tellingly, Day One does not mention the words 'and it was so,' a phrase that denotes permanence or finality, because that day's creation did not remain in its original inchoate form. From Day Two onwards, Hashem refined the heavenly and earthly material.

The words 'with the beginning' carry additional meaning: Hashem created time itself. There was a moment in time that was not preceded by a prior moment in time – and that initial moment is referred to as *'reshit.'*

A close reading provides readers with three axioms that contrast sharply with secular, philosophical beliefs.

- There is indeed such a thing as a moment in time that is not preceded by a prior moment in time.
- Creation ex nihilo is possible.
- The Creator directly fashioned heaven and earth, which included multiple basic universal building-blocks. The Deity can produce more than one thing despite His complete unity.

A translation of the first verses follows yet students should be aware of the depth emanating from each letter, word and space.

'With the beginning…the Almighty…created…the heavenly (spheres)… and earthly (spheres). The earthly (spheres) appeared…inchoate and incipient…with darkness over the mass…and a supernatural energy…vitalized… primordial basics.'

Specific terms are thus pregnant with meaning. Word placement, too, teaches much. The prepositional phrase 'With the beginning' precedes 'the Almighty' which is the verse's subject. This is because man's (finite) understanding cannot fathom the Creator save through His imprints on the world. Had the verse began with the subject – 'the Almighty created the world' – a presumptuous false impression vis-à-vis man's apprehension of Him would take root. Also, the reader is apprised that only two items were the sources

of future forgings – heaven and earth. 'The beginning' was not a third origin of creation. Now that the verse order is such, these two important pieces of information – the universe's creation and man's understanding of his Creator – more faithfully reflect reality.

The Sages[2] explain why the first verse includes the article (*et ha...v'et ha...*) connoting '*the* heaven and *the* earth.' One proposal is that the use of an article preempts misreading heaven and earth as creation partners. These articles place a qualified separation between the Almighty and the creations. Additionally, Day One creations were not merely created, but were imbued with the potential of the subsequent days' items that would be forged from them.

In the second verse, the focus is on earth, with heaven, despite being mentioned first in the previous verse, relegated to a seeming afterthought. This is because heaven's material – *malachim* and the universal apparatus – are abstruse and difficult to imagine, let alone comprehend. The Torah focuses on the more straightforward.

Two possible elucidations of the second verse present themselves:

a) Initially, a mishmash of all four elements contained their basic, respective characteristics. Full stop. As no heavenly apparatus functioned, light sources were absent. All was utterly obscured. Heavenly intelligent beings exerted some influence over the universe, generating a rudimentary motion. Existence idled.
b) The earth was completely desolate. Reality as we know it did not exist. Whatever murky life these inchoate four elements had it was not illuminated with any light source. Hashem's will influenced and imbued vitality to the universe apparatus and earthly waters.

The Almighty's first recorded utterance – now that there was some existence other than Him to "hear" it – beckoned 'let there be light' followed by a newly executed reality 'and there was light.' A significant subject that will be discussed later is: If Hashem desired light, why was the creation of the luminaries and reflector light sources (sun, moon, and stars) not part of Day One events? Be that as it may, the Creator currently desired, so to speak, a quick-fix light arrangement in order to provide a time reference for the seven days of creation. A physical reality emerged. This radiance emanated from...nowhere

2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:14

at all. *Ex nihilo*, an amorphous luminous entity spread out over existence. Thus, light's quantum leap 'and there was light,' with all of its packets and properties, miraculously came into being on Day One despite the absence of familiar luminaries. A first-rank wonder.

'Hashem *said* let there be…' That proclamation introduced or announced an event, created reality. In a true and deeper sense, any such declaratory utterance reflects intelligence and intent, often associated with an event's onset. ("Watch this. I am going to knock the ball over the fence.")

'And there was light' is the phrase chosen to describe that wondrous phenomenon coming into existence. "And so it was" which appears regarding many subsequent creations is reserved for features that persisted beyond creation's first week. This preternatural radiance was shelved on Day Four when the sun, moon and stars made their debut.

In contrast to many subsequent creations, the Torah does not state that Hashem "made light." As shall be noted throughout the creation narrative, that terminology is reserved for forging vastly diverse entities from one primary source. Day One's light was a uniform energy created from nothing, emanating from nowhere.

'The Almighty saw the light was good' expresses satisfaction. Specifically, light set a good reference point for distinguishing time periods. Had the Creator worked, so to speak, in darkness then marking daily time intervals would have been impossible. By the same token if light had permanently expelled darkness, time would have assumed redundancy. Alternating light and dark did the trick, which is why the Creator 'separated between light and between dark.' Harnessing light's usefulness dictated as much. Oscillating light and dark corresponds to our conceptions of day and night. Further ensconced in the verse is that Hashem created variations of light and dark. Gradations of morning light peak and fade. The same is true for dark; it has chiaroscuro.

'The Almighty *saw* the light' begs elucidation. What vision or seeing apparatus is implied when it comes to the Almighty? Among the multiple meanings of the verb "to see" is to decide in favor of one option when confronted with pros and cons of various choices. Here, the Almighty related to or appraised this particular light positively. That is, despite the artificiality and temporality of Day One's light (as opposed to sunlight etc.) the Almighty *saw* and recognized in it an important function to set apart day from night.

After the Creator saw utility in light, Hashem '*called* the light day and the dark He called night.' Not only did Hashem acknowledge day/night's potential function, He determined that this would indeed be light and dark's purpose. 'And there was evening and there was morning marking day one.' Two points emerge. First, dark was created before light, as mentioned in the second verse. Second, the verse alludes to Day One's light/dark functioning in precisely the same way as later luminaries. Hashem did not set an "off switch" – alternately plunging the world into sudden pitch blackness and blinding light. This light came with a dimmer knob, allowing darkness to gradually descend and daylight to slowly emerge. Additionally, each creation day closes with the same verse to emphasize that all had a lesser "evening" component to it, and a superior "morning" element. These will be explored in turn.

A final point that bears mention is the creation narrative's consistent reference to the Almighty by His Name *Elohim* as opposed to Hashem's Four-Letter Ineffable appellation. Since the latter Divine reference conveys His essence and the former His affecting others, *Elohim* certainly better captures His omnipotent role in creation.[3]

Day Two

'And Hashem said: "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and it will separate water from water."'

Commentators have taken many and diverse directions in explaining the creation and function of the firmament, but none satisfactorily account for the straightforward reading of our passage and/or the Sages' interpretations thereof. A proper analysis looks to incorporate all primary source material without losing sight of the big picture. To recap, Day One witnessed the creation of a single, massive universe structure or system. Day Two's galactic firmament – of the cosmos' components – was carved of that original envelope of the universe. As previously mentioned, Day One's creation differed fundamentally from the five successive days in that only Day One witnessed a creation *ex nihilo*. The ensuing days' creations were fashioned from Day One primordial material. For example, the "earth" of Day One that included four basic elements became the building blocks of successive earthly creations (dry land, soil, vegetation etc.) The same holds true for heaven's model. As discussed

3. See Day Six below for further elaboration of this issue.

above, by "heaven" the Torah included *malachim* or heavenly facilitators as well as material that produced Day Two's firmament.

A glaring difference between heaven and earth arises. Heaven required only one building block while earth required four. An inherent stability of the celestial formations contrasts with terrestrial instability, what with all of its destruction and rebuilding through nature and history's vicissitudes.

Metaphorically, it is useful to view a causal relationship between the first and subsequent creation days as akin to parents giving birth to children. Briefly, four reasons help explain why primary heaven stuff could not keep constant and had to, in a sense, spawn outgrowths.

- The plethora of malachim needed to oversee, control, and modulate a large heavenly network of celestial motions and cycles.
- The disparate movement of various celestial bodies necessitates detachment from one central gear.
- The sun and moon work in delicate balance or harmony through an array of divergent elements. Forces generated by the original universe envelope would be too overbearing on its direct dependents, causing solar burnout or malfunction. (Hence the sun and luminaries have their own respective orbits and systems.)
- Seemingly infinite sub-parts of heaven are necessary for earth's proper functioning. An axiom: The heavens greatly influence and impact terrestrial happenings. Greater latitude for heaven translates into wider earthly potential range.

Turning to an explanation of the verses, a crucial prefatory remark is in order. Not unlike its adaptive nature, the word "water" (*mayim*) takes on many different meanings. Beyond the familiar H^2O, it refers to heavenly physical matter as well (Hebrew's two words "heaven" (*shamayim*) and 'water' are nearly identical). The term can be representative of all four basic earthly elements. Occasionally, in recognition of the substance's purity, "water" idiomatically encompasses all of physical reality in its pristine state. In summary, the word carries four distinct imports:

1. All physical reality
2. Heavenly physical beings
3. The four earthly elements
4. H^2O

"Water" is thus an exceedingly fluid word, and its meaning can change from one phrase to the next.

'Let there be a firmament within the water' means that on Day Two the Creator forged a firmament from within the primordial universe apparatus (meaning #1). 'It will separate water from water' means that galaxies, planetary systems and orbits forged from the original massive universe expanse would, per se, cleave it asunder.

Astronomers' elaborate calculations of heavens' orbits are among the natural world's tremendous achievements. The Sages[4] saw allusion to this mathematical precision and complexity in the words 'And the Almighty *made* the firmament.' The mind-boggling, diverse nature of all various celestial systems, their different directions and distances of orbit dictate that the initial universe apparatus did not have an ability to simply "produce" all of them on its own without direct Divine intervention. Hashem had to, so to speak, conduct heaven's symphony. He was directly engaged in giving out roles and directing their performance. As previously mentioned, this is the meaning of 'the Almighty made' whenever it appears in the creation narrative – the diversity of the "children" forged of their "parent" element loudly proclaims Divine intercession. That is why this term does not appear on Days Three or Five. On these days the digression of the product from its source is, relatively speaking, not that overwhelming.

Separating between the waters below the firmament means that the initial hodgepodge, the indistinct form of these four elements, (meaning #3) was now altered. Hashem imbued the world with photoelectric, gravitational, centrifugal, magnetic, and other forces generated by newly placed galaxies and solar systems, engendering a separation and placement of the four elements into their respective spheres of influence. In the heavens as well, each planet, orbit, or heaven was created with distinct properties (meaning #2). 'And so it was.' Until eternity – that was how long these formations had been designed to endure.

'The Almighty called the firmament *heaven* and that was evening and morning of the second day.' Wildly diverse yet interactive galactic systems – in all their grandeur – fall under a uniform header or nomenclature: Heaven. A grand matriarch has many and divergent descendants. All trace themselves to her majesty. So, too, the firmament's diverse elements derive from Day

4. *Bereshit Rabbah* 4:6

One's heavenly material. "Firmament," "heaven," and by extension "water" intertwine indistinguishably.

A final observation regarding Day Two takes stock of why the Almighty did not profess satisfaction and say that it was good. One approach suggests that, in a sense, heaven's crown jewels are the sun and stars (luminaries and reflectors). They had not, as yet, been fixed. Thus it would be misleading and premature to pronounce that day's handiwork's goodness. Another possibility is that the separation of the four earthly elements was not completed until Day Three, when earth and water staked out, per se, their respective areas.

In sum, Day Two saw the separation of heavenly and earthly building blocks into variant, clearly demarcated parts and spheres. All references to firmament in *Tanach* and *Chazal* can be explained bearing this description of creation's second day in mind. As a small example, an exceptional aid for students to better conceptualize heaven's hierarchy is available with a review of *Tehillim* chapter 148. King David provides an excellent creation summary. After praise for the Creator, he delineates a succinct order of heavenly bodies. Beginning with the highest heaven and descending, so to speak, the psalm lists: heaven (the original universe apparatus), highest places (firmament's zodiac), *malachim*, heavenly hosts (Mars, Jupiter and Saturn which lie more distant from the sun than earth) and concludes with the sun, moon and stars (Venus and Mercury). Summarizing, David lists the highest heavens (Day Two's creation) and 'the water above heaven' alluding to Day One's primordial heavens.[5]

Day Three

'And the Almighty said: "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together in one place."'

The segregation of water from the earth's surface resulted in making land visible. Both water and land staked their respective and separate domains. Current laws of nature dictate that the influence of astral and lunar cycles holds waters back from flooding earth and facilitates vegetation formation and growth. One commentary[6] therefore felt compelled to distort the plain meaning of creation's sequence to allow for the luminaries' function preceding Day Three

5. A lengthy treatment of all the sources is beyond the scope of this chapter (see foreword). The interested reader is encouraged to study Abravanel's masterful treatment of this weighty, abstruse subject in the original Hebrew.
6. *Ibn Ezra* 1:6

happenings. But such an approach is an unnecessary over-reliance on natural laws, and a denial of Torah truths. During creation days, these phenomena were brought about solely by Divine works. Initial solar and lunar influences were thus only for the sake of *maintaining* these phenomena, but played no role in their *formation*. The Creator wanted earth's first growth to commence specifically and purposely before certain celestial bodies became activated. This timing promotes belief in the Designer's omnipotence over nature. To be sure, the Creator did imbue nature with important functions. After creation's first seven days, natural systems impact and influence the world – both through natural phenomena and, as a manner of speaking, behind closed celestial doors. However, at this delicate and incipient stage, the Almighty must be acknowledged and recognized as *the* universe's main Actor – exclusively. The fact of waters being gathered in Day Three underscored that point.

Importantly, confining water to a single area upon the earth appears out of character. Generally, water covers land and submerges it. Typically, astral influence accomplishes tidal effects. The Torah implies that the Almighty intentionally swept the waters aside to a single place, or more accurately, to their designated arenas so that they should no longer encroach on the turf's terrain. The water pools were called "seas" because "waters" more readily refers to the heavenly spheres, as evidenced by the nearly identical Hebrew words for "water" and "heaven" (as mentioned in the Day Two discussion above). Any reference to water on earth is really a borrowed term. Hashem therefore dubbed these waters – water-bodies, earmarking their earthliness. The Hebrew term for sea (*yam*) is an acronym for *yabashah-mayim* – earth-water, in recognition of its brackishness being determined by its proximity to the sun scorched earth.

As the curtain descended on Day Three, the Almighty noted with satisfaction that the day's work was good. Day Three witnessed an anomaly when Hashem swept the waters from the earth. The normal expectation is that waters should sweep away or at least cover earth because of water's superior elemental composition. Imposing borders was thus an unnatural limitation of water's physics, but is not an inherently negative phenomenon. In reality, the term 'and it was good' is repeated. The double kudos of Day Three are a celebration of the dual accomplishments of water confinement and the creation of vegetation.

§§§

Before the third day discussion closes, two points rooted in classic Greek thought need introduction in order to better clarify the creation narrative verses. First, the various forms of life are divided into five classes: (a) The lowest rung is essential gaseous vapor or condensation; (b) A combination of essential elements that form more complex lifeless items; (c) Plant life; (d) Animal life; (e) Human beings. These five classifications have clearly marked properties and traits. For example, humans differ from animals in respect to their cognitive reasoning and speech etc.

The second point boils down to a crucial theological question: The Torah opens with heaven and earth's creation. Can these divergent domains find commonality? Does the divide preclude interaction? To grossly oversimplify, it is not a simple matter for *malachim*, purely intelligent beings, to relate to a material world. This issue has an auxiliary one. Even if a conclusion posits that heaven and earth do have points of convergence, what will be the Creator's relationship with a material world? Not surprisingly, classic Greek and Hebrew thought diverge. (Within Greek or Western philosophers, gradations emerge.)

Jewish tradition, based on the Biblical text, teaches that the two lowest life forms [(a) and (b)] derive no influence from the spiritual realm (*sechalim nivdalim*). By nature, these two classes are too crude in constitution. Such objects lack adequate sophistication toward things heavenly. However, the third rung (c) of botanical life does respond to celestial bodies via galactic and astral spheres. The fourth (d) rung of animal life has intimate and close ties to *malachim*. This explains the ultimate source of all animal intelligence, communication, and behavior. (Modern research bears testimony to the fact that animals possess high levels of creativity, imagination, and resourcefulness.)

Man's eternal soul (e) was not carved from celestial bodies, but rather directly from the Creator. The fact is that just as the Maker separately created *malachim*, the Almighty also made the human soul. There are several Biblical references that prove a sublime foundation that fundamentally sets humans apart from these four lower levels of earthly classifications. In light of this two point preface, the verses can be better put into perspective and context.

After land and waters segregated, Phase Two in the Maker's plans continued with a distinct goal of making an inhabitable, sustainable and productive

world of elements, plants, animals and, humans. 'And the Almighty said let the earth's soil grow grass.' Henceforth, Hashem moved on to complex life forms fashioned by merging these four base elements. Gaseous and metal forging is not mentioned since their formation requires no intervention from external sources. They aggregate and form self-sufficiently. Vegetation is the first level in need of outside input. As discussed above, on the third day the sun, moon and stars so crucial for fostering foliage and herb growth had not yet been activated. Hashem therefore gave the directive to commence growth. After creation's six day period, celestial bodies took command and guardianship over their respective earthly wards, so to speak.

Three distinct flora prototypes are mentioned in the passage. Type I covers wild seeds and spores that grow without man's involvement. Type II is grains and vegetables that require planting. They are not perennials. Trees comprise Type III. Tree fruit produces a similar fruit from the seeds it houses when planted in the ground, and each tree produces *only* its own kind. There is no haphazard growth of, say, plums from an apple seed. Barren trees are included as well, since they too contain seeds. It is interesting to note that these three types of growth responded to the Creator's *direct* command on Day Three. After six days of creation when herbs, foliage and flora get transferred, to the celestial domain and trusteeship, a different process occurs. As to be expected under supernatural tutelage, growth was stimulated and accelerated in ways that the later natural processes retarded.

The Creator expressed satisfaction with Day Three declaring 'it was good.' It pleased the Almighty to have directly set up vegetation before nature's creation week had been completed. Additionally, the vast variety of plant life species ranged with seeming boundless potential for mankind's benefit. Some types grow, mature and die overnight. Others have a stamina, longevity and heartiness that allow them to live for decades and centuries. 'And it was the evening and morning of the third day.' A less dramatic "evening" occurrence revealed dry land; "morning" bustle witnessed vegetation growth. The fact that they both transpired within a day long period teaches that these events are related and interconnected. Natural law: Earth freed from its watery jacket allows vegetation to sprout. Mother earth was endowed with the ability to grow and nurture produce.

At creation's midpoint, it is important to sum up and observe that as the process unfolded and evolved, different verbs (to create, to make, or neither) allude and point to a hierarchy of Hashem's input – be it *ex nihilo*, imbuing of forces, or positioning, respectively – as heavenly and earthly relationships assumed definition.

Day Four

'And the Almighty said: "Let the luminaries distinguish the day from the night. Let them be for signs and appointed times, for days and years."'

Anticipating Days Five and Six when animal and human life would come into being, the Creator energized the sun, moon, and stars during the fourth day. This underscored light and heat's central role in man and animals' existence. Plant photosynthesis also utilizes light and heat. In theory, Hashem could have formed man and animal in a world bereft of heat and warmth – miraculously. But the Maker wanted animal and man to thrive, be strong and procreate. Heat and light are a prerequisite for their ongoing existence.

Technically speaking, what happened on Day Four? A plausible sequence suggests that on Day One, independent light shone. On Day Two, orbits and spheres took up suspended placement, lacking all luminescence. Outer space was still very much a dark, drab arena. On Day Four, the Almighty infused particular areas and segments of Day Two's firmament with the original Day One light, in varying degrees. The blurred sun now blazed, the gloomy moon now glowed. The result was that light now became the sun's sole domain and heat was introduced to the world. 'Let there be luminaries in the heaven' announced this new and working order. Hashem purposely refrained from activating the sun and moon on Day Two so people would not misconstrue and attribute Day Three's creation process to any implicit celestial power.

Interestingly, the term 'let there be…' appears in only three places throughout creation's narrative – Day One light, Day Two firmament, and Day Four luminaries. The shared phrase conveys a common link, and teaches that the original light was affixed in the firmament, forming luminaries.

King David in Psalm 136 enjoins us to praise Hashem for His boundless inherent goodness coupled with benevolence manifest in His handiwork.

Creation's chronology and process are neatly tucked in this ode to the Almighty. The chart below elucidates each stitch's reference:

PSALM 136	REFERENCE
Praise the Lord of lords *(Elohei Haelohim)*	Malachim – sometimes referred to as elohim
Praise the Master of masters	Primordial universe apparatus which encompasses all physical existence
To He Who made great wonders alone	Other days' creations forged from initial matter
To He Who made heavens astutely	Firmament
To He Who spread land over waters	Day Three separation of water from dry land
To He Who made great lights	Imbuing firmament segments with Day One light

Light's confinement to particular places and the unevenness of the stars' distribution attest to a Will behind it all. Man cannot theorize let alone postulate all of the universe's minutiae.

What is meant by distinguishing between day and night? During the first three days, light's ebb and flow marked evening and morning. On Day Four, orbits and spheres became set in their perfect, calculable, and inviolable revolutions and elliptical cycles. Day and night, as they are currently and universally known, commenced.

Despite a worldwide consensus that a day consists of twenty-four hours, the Torah's definition of the transition point between day and night differs from that of astronomers. According to the Torah, daytime commandments are not dependent on the sun's sphere being above the horizon, but on sunlight visibility. The parameters used calculate from early morning until a time when practically no sunlight can be seen – evidenced by the stars' emergence.[7] In addition to demarcating the division between day and night, the luminaries' positions also serve to indicate time within the daytime and nighttime hours.

7. See BT *Berachot* 2a; *Megillah* 20a

Day Four's legacy was more than light quanta and radiating heat from the sun, moon, and stars. The passage also establishes a theological fundamental. As powerful as these celestial bodies are, they do not dictate world events. In contrast to astrologers' belief that destiny is determined by heavenly formations, the Torah posits that the ultimate influence is accorded to the Almighty. Celestial bodies merely reflect reality – the what ('signs') and when ('appointed times') – as preordained by Hashem.

An additional utility of the celestial bodies 'for appointed times, for days and years' refers to seasonal and climactic changes. The axes and tilts of the stars and planets contribute to these changes in matters like seasons and day's duration. Reference is also made to the zodiac's twelve signs. There is also allusion to weekly, monthly, and annual cycles. Day Four's accomplishments for the physical world include setting important natural laws in motion. Some celestial laws and properties clearly belong to theoretical astrology and astronomy. Other heavenly attributes influenced human history, as the entire astral system enabled man to organize social and commercial life methodically. Regularity in daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, yearly, and septennial cycles provided a naturally perfect rhythm with which to calibrate personal and national activities.

The Torah's account of Day Four continues 'And the Almighty made the two great luminaries. The sun's domain reigned during day and the moon and stars at night.' The tremendous diversity of the stars' size, splendor, and situation merits the verb "made."

Both the sun and moon are called "great" or "big." This is not a quantifying adjective, but more qualitative. That is, both provide the world with the greatest light. Also, the verse does not mean to equate the sun's and moon's luminescence, but simply to imply their superior illuminative ability in contrast to the galaxy's other stars. The sun's dominance is manifest in daylight activities such as photosynthesis and heat. The moon's influence is observable in water bodies of oceans, seas, and rivers; ebbing and flowing tides pertain to the lunar realm.

On Day Four 'the Almighty assigned them in heaven's firmament.' Verses such as these have triggered much debate and polemic among ancient thinkers like Pliny and Aristotle. After studying their arguments, some great Jewish sages concluded that the truth rested with Rashbi[8]: Man cannot know such things with perfect certainty. What can be derived is that apparently

8. *Bereshit Rabbah* 6

the Almighty did confer upon celestial bodies some measure of dominion. This is borne out by the Torah's use of the verb 'to assign (give)' which here means to lend authority.[9]

As Day Four concluded, Hashem expressed satisfaction with all of the achievements and declared 'and it was good.' The precision, size, mass, weight, orbit, and distance of each and every star was made just so. Any deviation spells total disaster for Planet Earth. The Creator saw in Day Four a perfect plan unfold, flawless down to details unimaginable, inconceivable, and unknowable. Yes, it was very good indeed.

§§§

In light of Day Four – witnessing the creation of celestial bodies so wonderfully majestic – one might mistakenly ask: Why did the Creator design and activate perfect galactic luminaries for the use and benefit of lowly animal and man? Three approaches are offered. First, the question's premise is that heavenly radiant masses are intelligent beings.[10] That assumption is certainly debatable. If we take a position that they are not, the question is moot. The Sages[11] suggest that since man would be created on Day Six with a heaven-chiseled soul, he outranks the sun and moon. In any event, man assuredly possesses certain advantages over the heavenly facilitators insofar as Hashem desired man's input and partnership to elevate the world through a thoughtful life of proactive religious contemplation and obeisance. The Creator fashioning an anthropocentric universe makes sense.

The second approach posits that one need not understand that the celestial bodies, with their respective qualities and orbits, are only for man's sake. Nor is their purpose only self-serving. Day Four activities answer to a Higher Authority. A parable: A business magnate builds a palace for himself. The elaborate building has doors and windows. In the windows, this baron places candles for the benefit of passersby. It would be false and inaccurate to say that this potentate built his entire palace for the sake of the pedestrians, despite the fact that they do derive certain residual light use. The same holds true in our case. While mankind enjoys light and heat from the sun and stars, it cannot be said that celestial bodies were, ipso facto, placed and positioned only for humans.

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9. See *Tehillim* 136:8–9
10. See *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:4
11. *Vayikra Rabbah* 20:2

The third and last approach views all of creation as harmonious and perfectly well-balanced. From the Maker's point of view, the universe appears as an organic whole structure. Just as a person's heart pumps vitality into an entire organism, the main celestial gear apparatus extends its influence over the smaller and lesser components of that apparatus. It is preposterous to assert that hearts are subservient to hair follicles or toes because as a result of the heart's function hair grows or that blood does get pumped to body's extremities. Since a human body, for example, is a self-contained unit, it cannot be said that a subservient relationship of the parts exist. The sum of the parts harmoniously contributes to the organism's wellbeing. All human body systems (vascular, digestive, immune etc.) have command centers, muscles or organs, but that does not create a master-servant relationship since a body is an integrated unit. Therefore, one cannot say that the heavens are subservient and inferior to superior man. Since all creation occurred on Day One and all successive days' activity was a matter of melding, forging, placing, and setting in motion, then in a sense, the perfect organic universe has no hierarchy with superiors and inferiors. The sum parts work together for a specific design or purpose. In conclusion, all three approaches are complementary. They give direction to help understand intrinsic values and functions of diverse and disparate heavenly and earthly creations.

Day Five

'And Hashem said: "Let the waters swarm abundantly with thrashing creatures that have vitality and let birds fly above the earth in the open heavenly firmament."'

On Day Five, the creation of simple fauna began. Winged, swimming, and swarming life took to the skies, seas, and marshes. This led ancients to consider environment compatibility with animal life support. Plausibly, the three primal bio system building blocks consist of earth, water, and air. These three essentials share a domain and interact. That is why, for example, in the bowels of the earth's subsurface there are aquifers and cavities. Air pockets fill some of the earth's fissures and vacuum. Various seismic episodes or volcanic eruptions result from elemental mixtures. Ocean landscapes include earth formations and air pockets. Storms and tidal waves are other phenomena that stem from the elements' mixture.

Primitive biological life began to swim, crawl, and fly. Naturally, the zoological beginnings recorded here correspond to these three elements: Fish – water; fowl – air; insects – earth. Conspicuously missing from the prime elements is fire due to the incompatibility with the generation and support of life within its heated confines.

Four different animal categories exist. The lowest, simplest form is associated with fungus or bacteria. It is marked by an ability to spontaneously generate without male and female interaction. It has no reproductive ability. No mention of this lowly life form is explicitly recorded in the Torah because of its nondescript significance, just as mineral and geological formations are skipped over. Type II in the animal hierarchy does need a male and female to reproduce, but offspring formation is ex-utero. Reptiles and birds, for example, fit into this vastly diversified category. Type III includes animals that reproduce through mating, with fetuses developing inside a female. This kind, being more sophisticated, did not come into being on Day Five but rather on Day Six. Finally human beings are the highest mammals. Similar to Type III animals, they procreate through sexual intercourse. Unlike his forerunner, though, man possesses a higher intelligence. As testimony to man's potential greatness over the animal kingdom, his creation caps Day Six.

Swarming, spawning, and thrashing describe the rapidly multiplying primitive marine life. Water is home to these aquatic creatures. Birds of flight were forged in one of two ways:

a) Both fish and birds were formed from a water-air merger, but fish were far more influenced by water, and birds were fashioned from a very light mist or refined water extract. Neither relate to earth's primal earth element.
b) Birds represent a middle ground between animals and fish. They were formed from a water-air-earth combination of airy algae. Thus, when it comes to their ritual slaughter, they occupy a median *halachic* position. Their minimum gullet cut is less than that of cattle. Fish require no ritual slaughter.[12]

12. See BT *Chullin* 27

Also on Day Five, 'Hashem created big fish life.' The verse contrasts small, swarming water creatures with large and fat fish. Interestingly, the Torah assumed that all six days' creations were full-bodied. Fish, fowl, animals and man did not evolve from skinny, skimpy specimens to fat, plump and healthy ones. Rather, creation's prototypes were perfectly proportioned. Furthermore, various species possessed a reproductive capability that particularized procreation to each specific fish or animal type. Big fish life, the Sages teach, may refer to whales or other large sea creatures.[13] Finally, note that the verb choice "to create" with regards to living animals connotes an *ex nihilo* bringing into existence of feeling associated with some sort of emotion, albeit primitive. This markedly sets them apart from the previous day's creations. Even the narrative of animals' creation on Day Six does not use the verb "to create" but rather "to do" or "to make." This is because animals' ability to sense and feel had already been ingrained in Day Five creatures.

Hashem looked at fish life, large and small, and declared 'and it was good.' Ancient man's lack of understanding or appreciation of marine biology did not, of course, detract from its importance and usefulness. Ornithological origins – mist or algae – were deemed appropriate despite birds' entirely different subsequent method of procreation. 'Hashem blessed them and instructed them to procreate.' This refers to the wondrous reproductive method of egg-hatching fish, birds, and water reptiles. A detached ovum able to host and nurture life is a remarkable phenomenon in need of the Almighty's blessing. In summary, the fifth "evening" alludes to the creation of water life, while the later fifth "morning" refers to more advanced bird life.

Day Six

'And Hashem said: "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their species – herbivores, crawlers, carnivores of their kind. And so it was."'

Day Six was marked by complex creature creations. The Earth's association with fauna markedly differs from Day Three's flora though they too sprouted from land. Greenery is a byproduct of soil and cannot exist without it. Animals live, per se, independent of soil. These advanced-stage animals differ from fish in that respect, too. Fish cannot survive out of water.

13. See BT *Bava Batra* 73b, 74b

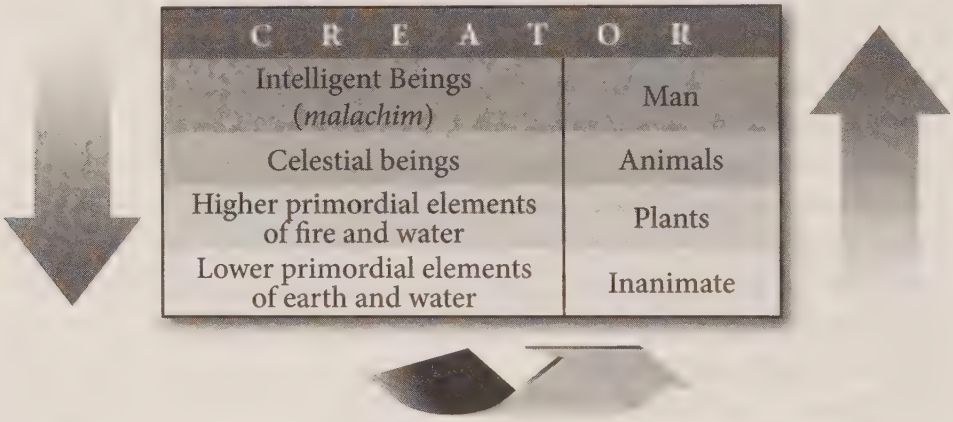
Three important divisions exist among Day Six animal creations. Type I herbivores subcategorize as domestic and non-domestic kinds. Type II encompasses land-creeping reptiles that slither and propel without hands and feet. Finally, carnivores and predators make up Type III. All categories procreate with their own kind. The verse that states 'and so it was' alludes to Heaven's plan that these species be imbued with staying power meant to endure as permanent fixtures on Planet Earth.

As stated above Day Six creatures are under the domain and influence, so to speak, of *malachim*. This is in contrast to plant life whose source is linked to celestial bodies (e.g. astrological effects). Day Six's wide range and breadth that runs the animal kingdom's gamut stretches the human imagination. The little goat and lumbering elephant; house cat and lion; ant and boa constrictor – all are the Creator's works.

'The Almighty saw that it was good.' Despite a hesitant first glance at an animal roster that includes many nasty and dangerous animals and reptiles capable of harming man, even those savage, violent and pernicious wild beasts are, on the whole, good. Grisly killers can act as Heaven's avengers. Additionally, they may possess beneficial properties or uses crucial for man's medicine, ointment, or tonic.

Also on Day Six, man was made. 'And the Almighty said (pensively): "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."' There are three reasons that explain why man was last in creation's conga line. First, creation should be viewed as a cumulative process whereby each succeeding life form builds on prior works. For example, man can and should be seen as a composite of all of the previous days' accomplishments and preparations. The modality and structure of man constitutes a radical, though progressive, departure from plant life. Tracing creation from vibrant plants to instinctive and feeling animal to man who is capable of speaking, thinking, and reasoning is, in a sense, a fabulously evolving work in process. Man's roots, so to speak, go back to leaves of grass. But there should be no understatement; man strides atop all of nature's existence as its pinnacle and crowning act. While some thinkers dub man "the noble savage," it certainly does not represent Torah thought. Most high and exalted is man. Vastly resourceful, man is cousin to *malachim*. He seethes and teems with extraordinary potential.

The second approach waxes philosophic. Picture six days' creations as a double helix. Starting high on the model with exclusively intelligent beings called *malachim*, creatures moved lower to encompass celestial bodies. The two purest primordial heavenly elements of air and fire came next, and finally earth and water base elements bottom out this chart. Now walk along the baseline and begin ascending the helix's right side. Begin with inanimate rock or geological formation before climbing higher to plants, animals and man. Looked at in that way, in Hashem's hierarchy, man is elliptically linked with *malachim* (see chart).



A mystical third reason can be found in a conversation between Rabbis Eliezer and Akiva.[14] According to their tradition, *Melech HaMashiach*, the pinnacle of history, will come in the six thousandth year from creation (Day Six=year six thousand).

Why did man's creation not warrant a separate day instead of being lumped together with advanced animals? In addition to the Sages' mystical approach above, two more responses come to mind. First, it is clear that just as Day Five grouped fish and fowl together largely due to their common reproductive method of laying and hatching eggs, so too all Day Six mammals have the same gestation process. Females carry their young to full term in their womb until birth. The second explanation resounds moralistic. True, man and his coterminous four-legged friends differ greatly. Animals cannot expand beyond their physical essence. This is not the case with people. Sensibly exercising freedom of choice enables the expansion of the mind, and

14. *Zohar Chadash Midrash Hane'elam, Bereshit*

affords greater opportunities. Yet, as if to goad man, the Maker made him and animal on the same day. A gauntlet, if you will, for people to transcend their animalistic behavior and soar. By tempering man's animalistic impulses, a person chooses eternal life. Conversely, ignoring higher agendas grounds man and causes him to share animals' milieu and recesses.

Life's ultimate goal, then, is responsible and rational transcendence. Ancient thinkers expressed such notions graphically. Animals' physical build gives them a proclivity to look downwards to the ground since that is their essence. *Malachim* or intelligent beings' natural pose, on the other hand, looks heavenward for that is their bent. Man's upright bearing and gait peer straight ahead. His fluctuating desire to imitate higher or lower beings is a function of where he sets his sights.

In contrast to earlier Day Six animals who 'come forth from the land,' later Day Six man is styled by his Maker Himself. The wonder of man is marvelous to all his beholders. Who was Hashem addressing when He proposed 'let *us* make man'? One possibility is that the Almighty's audience was the earth itself. Man has a dual identity. At one and the same time his physical body is terrestrial, and it is the earth that contributed physical elements of his existence. Human spirit, though, emanates from Hashem. The Creator and the earth thus partnered to forge man. Of course, the simile of man as 'in the Almighty's image' is metaphorical. Even as hyperbole it is a mighty stretch. To be sure, man walks a fraught paradox, tugged along by heaven and earth. He is expected to dominate the earth responsibly and benevolently in a way that the Creator desires. The Sages[15] put it this way. People only need fear stalking and wild beasts to the extent that they resemble them with cheap, base behavior.

The second approach considers the homiletic aspect of man's creation. In contrast to lower plant or animal life which is in the soil or water's domain, man's dominant sphere lies with *malachim*. Hence Hashem addressed them. The Creator convened the intangible intellectual-being community of facilitators and in effect said to them: Man will be different. He will resemble you. 'Let us make man' like you, with a highly developed reasoning capacity.

Man's image mirroring Hashem's has three dimensions. A preface will help explain the first. Religious-minded thinkers posit that the Almighty is the world's sole Actor. By definition, a world created by Hashem must, perforce,

15. BT *Sanhedrin* 38b; *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:12

bear some imprint of the Creator. It follows that all creatures – inanimate and animate – have some measure of connectedness to Hashem. Four technical attributes or outgrowths of the Almighty's imprint on the world include:

a) the format, shape, and structure of all creations including the inanimate
b) an innate ability to grow, mature, and develop such as in plants
c) the endowment of instinct, feeling, and sense encompassing the animal world
d) the capacity for intelligence and reason

Since all creation owns one or more of these traits (a–d), it follows that in some way they can be traced back to the Maker. King David alluded to this when he wrote: 'Can the One Who fashioned ears not hear? Does the Creator of eyes not see?'[16] This is not to say that all of the traits follow Hashem's nature exactly (or even approximately). Rather, by man's understanding and logic, these four specifications can be traced to Hashem, the Source of all life.

To simplify and conclude this first part of the discussion, then, man resembles his Maker in the specific sense that he, too, is a compact repository of these four trace attributes. Man's manual, as it were, shares commonality with his Maker in a way and degree altogether different than any other physical being.

Man is likened to his Creator in a second way. His internal organs and bodily functions are microcosms. For example, the nervous and cardiovascular systems send neuron impulses and vitality throughout the organism. In the heavenly domain, such corresponding functions occur through celestial bodies, planets, and stars. As stated above, even a blade of grass cannot grow were it not for the approval of a celestial body.[17] Similarly man's digestive, glandular, or reproductive systems find parallel with certain functions occurring within the earth's bowels that impact plant or animal development. Finally, there is in man an intelligent aspect that runs or controls thought, speech, and behavior. This roughly follows the ultimate power of the Almighty. Among other things, the Almighty is the ultimate Conductor and Overseer.

16. *Tehillim* 94:9
17. *Bereshit Rabbah* 10:6

There, in sum, is a sketch of man in his capacity as a mini-universe comprising within his body and soul similarities to the natural and supernatural worlds. Since man is in wondrous possession of so much grandeur, it follows that a highly differentiated, self-realized man – say a prophet – wreaks wonders. Indeed prophecy taps into Hashem's mysteries, surfing space, and traveling time. Metaphorically, at least, man holds the keys to the universe's genome. The world's blueprints stand before the hoary prophet like putty, a mere piece of clay.

Finally, man's image reflects the Creator's in a third way. Prototype Adam, for example, was created as a brilliantly wise scholar capable of mastering every intellectual pursuit and academic discipline. His pure soul was hewn from transcendent heavens. Simply stated, man was imbued with perfect intelligence and exaltedness to the extent that Hashem testifies to his 'being in the Maker's image and likeness.' Here was description of a perfect, fully multi-tasking head, heart, and soul. Flawlessly, man worked.

Until now, the discussion has centered on man created in Hashem's image and likeness. Likely the two nouns are synonymous. It may be, however, that "likeness" is meant to modify "image." While the Torah conveys similar-type attributes as if to create parallels between finite man and infinite Almighty, it is, to be sure, a crude parallel. The Almighty is the *ultimate* reality, meaning, and essence. Man is the pinnacle of his *finite* domain. He is capable of achieving self-definition and true meaning. One speaks of Hashem as the *ultimate* ruler; man reigns supreme over all other worldly creatures. 'Subdue and dominate fish in the sea and birds in the sky.' Hashem promoted mankind to lead, and take command. In a way, he serves as the Almighty's field lieutenant. Since man is Hashem's proxy, he was created in the Maker's image and likeness. This promotes recognition of Hashem as the true Sovereign. When we consider man's centrality in the physical world, it aids the acknowledgement of a Creator of the entire universe.

'The Almighty created man.' The verse underscores the special *ex nihilo* creation of a pure intelligence that marks man's soul as unique. The sentence uses "to create" and not "to make," despite an earlier verse stating 'let us make man.' Man's dichotomy justifies a certain contradiction in terms. Leeway, if you will. Physically man belongs to the lower animal rungs, but spiritually he possesses a unique, eternal-linked soul.

'In the image of the Almighty He created *him*, male and female He created *them*.' A male mindset tends toward probing abstract mysteries of theoretical knowledge, but both genders participate equally in mankind's perpetuation. Masculinity is strongly associated with domination and rule, and woman's predominant features include fostering intimate partner closeness and creating a family unit.[18]

Adam and Chavah's creation as a couple emphasizes an important point about mankind, in general. It should not be misconstrued that duo-constructed man was designed to loathe his humanity. He is enjoined to rise above compulsive behavior in his quest for otherworldliness. Definitely he should not go overboard in pursuit of what can be associated with a man-centered philosophy (see Bavel Tower era[19]). Deprivation through shunning legitimate and requisite enjoyment widely misses the mark. Man inherently needs friendship, love, and intimacy. The Sages[20] advocated a rational approach of a healthy and disciplined control of competing impulses. Neither extreme will work optimally for man trudging along Hashem's eternal paths. Having prefaced the praise of moderation as an ideal, the truth of the matter is this. A quiet life skirting the herd, dominated by reason and intelligence, is likely less fraught with challenge, temptation and failure than when surrounded by social associates. Peer-pressure pursuit of pleasure can easily run amok.

'The Almighty blessed them and the Almighty commanded them to propagate.' Two separate matters are raised here. First is a generic blessing for successful endeavors, healthy and robust children, and general wellbeing. The second is a clear-cut command to be fruitful and multiply. Proper fulfillment of this directive requires a cohesive and measured approach to sexual intercourse and reproduction because people are capable of patchy understanding and downright nutty ideas. The subject of sexuality is chockfull of pitfalls because, among other things, man may not have yet maturely considered the big picture of his existence by the time his hormonal system has developed. A cogent doctrine beginning at an early age concerning man's

18. The ancient and medieval mindset had definite gender notions. It should not surprise the reader that their milieu influenced what they believed to be the 'ideal man' versus the 'ideal woman.' (The author cannot interpret let alone understand whether changing societal norms may have practically rendered Abravanel's notions void, null or irrelevant.)
19. Chapter two, seventh *aliyah*
20. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 14:3

purpose would certainly give good direction and empower adolescents to at least know right from wrong.

Not to lose sight of the big scheme, it is incumbent upon man to participate in Hashem's plan. Man should exhibit self-elevating behavior, constantly recalling attention to the Creator. Every human act or deed, ideally, attests to the Almighty's presence. Infused throughout man's being are proverbial arrows pointing to that simple but exalted notion. The human digestive tract is a case in point. 'I (Hashem) have given you herbs...fruit of the trees...for you to eat.' In tribute to his greatness, man's food consists of seed-bearing fruits and vegetables, the pinnacle of flora's world, as manifest by their sophistication and self-perpetuation mechanism. Creations less advanced than man lack the necessary enzymes to break down and benefit from his complex foodstuff. Sadly, this special treatment of man did not last beyond the honeymoon Garden of Eden era. Originally, the clear demarcation between mankind and animals was supposed to be discernible in even trivial details. As the Rambam[21] writes, once Adam and Chavah fell in sin and behaved like lower creations, their physiology changed with it. Original man was retooled and downgraded. At this first stage, mankind was prohibited from eating animal meat. The following *parashah* will take up the subject of man's changing diet.[22]

Looking over sublime man's creation, 'Hashem saw that it was very good.' Was the Almighty really that pleased with imperfect clumsy mankind capable of fall practically immediately? Did disgrace make man loathsome? Hashem's positive pronouncement is not subject to (major) change. Man towers – eternally.

'And it was evening and morning of the sixth day.' Less advanced animals belonged to the sixth "evening" and more majestic man corresponded to sixth day's "morning." As if to emphasize and celebrate the making of man within Hashem's grand design, a definite article "the" precedes the words 'sixth day' (*yom* ha*Shishi*).

English convention refers to the Infinite One by Names such as Almighty, Hashem, Maker, or Creator, but the Hebrew word for the Almighty (*Elohim*) is used as a constant throughout the entire creation account. This conveys both Hashem's omnipotence and, somewhat paradoxically, His imbuing

21. *Moreh Nevuchim* I:2
22. Fourth *aliyah*

the world with immutable laws. The first aspect is predicated on natural law, as commonly known, not yet being in force during the creation week. Everything was created and fashioned purely by omnipotent Divine will and say-so. Additionally, all the six successive days' work products are designed to unfailingly hew to the natural order. The rule's caveat does, however, take effect when the Jewish Nation in general, or the transcendentally pious in particular, are in need of an override. This explains situations in *Tanach* concerning supernatural miracles and phenomena, especially when catastrophe lurks to destroy the chosen Jewish People. The exceptions prove the constancy of nature's rule. This is what the Sages[23] mean when they state that originally Hashem created the world with the attribute of justice (read – immutable laws), but partnered it with the attribute of mercy (override) when He realized that the world could not be sustained with justice alone.

The post-creation narrative starts 'The heaven and the earth and all their products were perfect.' The description of the six days as flawless includes a Divine observation that all of the creations possessed exquisite substance, form, and essence. Everything was readied, and operational. Practically this means that upon conclusion of the sextet of creation days, the heavenly lever of Day One and all its products were developed to capacity. Facilitator *malachim* stood at attention. While back on the earth, the primordial components (fire, air, water, and earth) and everything forged from them reached readiness. One thing lacked: Functionality.

Put bluntly – nothing worked. Vitality had been achieved in every virtual sense except that life had not yet been activated. On the seventh day, all that had been "in the works" began self-sufficient churning. 'The Almighty brought all His handiwork to ultimate functionality on Day Seven.'

'He desisted on the seventh day from all His work that He had done.' This second phase has loosely been associated with Hashem trudging away, though the expression is pregnant with misconception. To be sure, Hashem's indelible imprint can be traced on a daily basis even after Phase One. Divine input is simply of a different caliber altogether. It is true that in comparison to the first stage, autonomous nature gathers momentum and coasts, so to speak, until further notice. But it would be fundamentally wrong to think that this phases out the Almighty's active involvement. The sheer magnitude of the

23. *Bereshit Rabbah* 12:15

ex nihilo miracle, even the forge-laden subsequent five creation days, dwarf, per se, second phase activities despite the infinitely ingenious sophistication of nature's ways.

From heaven and earth's perspective, creation week's final day was not one of tranquil serenity. Just the opposite is true. Day Seven witnessed a world awakening; a cascading bustle. Phase I of the Almighty's activity had ceased. From now on, all heaven and earth's existence were jolted into their respective sphere, momentum, orbit, cycle and reality. Nature took its course.

To sum up, Hashem's express desire and will created a world *ex nihilo* on Day One, fashioned work stuff and work product on successive Days Two through Six, and desisted from those specific types of activities on the seventh day. Thus Day Seven's onset marks Phase One's conclusion. A stage was set. From the seventh day and throughout the rest of history resounds of King Shlomoh's wisdom: 'There is nothing new under the sun.'[24]

The seventh of creation day acted like a period of transformation, ushering in, if you will, a change of the guards. *Shabbat* honors both creation's retirement and nature's ascent. 'The Almighty blessed the seventh day' expressed appreciation for the latter. It echoes the earlier benediction of the animals that prodded self-propagation. The blessing was acknowledged and vetted the world's newly-given autonomy. Interestingly, Hashem did not pronounce benediction on *the creations* but rather blessed *the seventh day* commemorating this momentous, watershed event. Just as a person might curse the day he was born,[25] Hashem blessed the *Shabbat* in recognition of its unbreakable link to the momentous occurrences of that special time.

'And He sanctified it.' Sanctity came in designating *Shabbat* as a time apart, saluting what had been completed. It is a tribute to Hashem 'desisting... from all His work.' *Shabbat* is forever associated with a type of coming-of-age graduation bash and celebration. The seventh day basks in delight.

A misconception persists that *Shabbat* only marks cessation and underscores Hashem's passivity commonly referred to as a day of rest. That is partly true but grossly oversimplified. The day's truer essence highlights celebration; the Creator exhilarated and enraptured jubilantly. These action verbs better capture *Shabbat*'s mystique.

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24. *Kohelet* 1:9
25. Cf. *Yirmiyahu* 20:14; *Iyyov* 2:3

Summing up, the *passuk* expresses rationale for sanctification: 'For it was then that He desisted from all processes utilized in creation'; and for the blessing: '[Imbuing the world with the ability] to generate.'

The Torah omits "And there was evening and morning of the seventh day" because, strictly speaking, no creative work took place. A deeper explanation is this. Mystics attribute *Shabbat*'s otherworldliness as belonging to the realm of souls.[26] Souls consist exclusively of light so it would be inappropriate to mention darkness in the same breath as sublime *Shabbat*.

Romantically, the Sages[27] record *Shabbat*'s appeal to the Creator: "Almighty One! To all creatures You have given appropriate mates. Why am I deprived?" Hashem responded with a promise: "When in the future the Jewish People stand at Mt. Sinai's base and vow to keep *Shabbat*, you will be their bride." *Shabbat* was bereft of a creation product to call its very own companion. The Chosen Nation would unite with *Shabbat* by observing its laws and by delighting in the eternal "Day which is an everlasting *Shabbat*"[28] – the World to Come.

§§§

How curious that the Almighty took a week to complete the creation process. There is, after all, no serious notion that the Creator needed time to set it all right. If creation is viewed as an object lesson for mankind, an approach jells. That is, if we take each day as a millennium,[29] there is an allusion that the world was made to last six thousand years and it would cease at the seventh millennium's advent.[30] Built-in obsolescence, if you will, characterizes the overall scheme. Significantly, the future commandments of *Shabbat* observance,[31] sabbatical,[32] and jubilee[33] cycles hint to this same theme.

Consider the tight interlock of the day/millennium correspondence. Light is made on the first day followed by darkness. Adam in the garden corresponds to light. On the same day, Adam transgressed. Darkness ensued – man

26. Cf. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 19; BT *Avodah Zarah* 3a
27. *Bereshit Rabbah* 11:8
28. *Mishnah Tamid* 7:4
29. Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:2
30. Cf. BT *Sanhedrin* 97a
31. *Shmot* 20:8–12 et al
32. *Vayikra* 25:1-7 et al
33. Ibid. 25:8–13

was exiled. Alternatively, Adam's overall righteousness symbolizes light and the second generation of treacherous Kayin is darkness. Another allusion of the first day's light is to Shet; the idolatrous era of Enosh[34] – a grey haze.

The second day's events served to grant a chaotic universe some semblance of orderliness and demarcation (see Day Two above). The second millennium witnessed Avraham diligently sifting through bunkum beliefs and discarding them. When at last he arrived at truth, the firebrand publicized it.

On creation's third day the waters were swept from the earth's surface, precipitating plant life. This hints to the Jews floundering and mired in Egyptian exile but then miraculously surviving it all and forcibly cast out to taste freedom. This fledgling nation, supernaturally unshackled, blossomed at Mt. Sinai. Independence of both body and soul shone brightly. Day Three of creation foreshadowed these two earth-shattering events – redemption and Torah – and praise came in pairs, repeating 'and it was good.'

On the fourth day the great sun ball of fire and moon came into existence. On the cusp of the four thousand year era King Shlomoh ruled the world, capping a wise and benevolent Jewish hegemony concomitant with the building of the First Temple. It stood during the fourth millennium. Hashem's Presence emanating from the Holy of Holies flooded the world with hope, promise and prayer. Cherubs, fiery altars, and sacrifice nurtured clarity, knowledge, and prophecy. The sun shone unhindered, pervasively. Towards Day Four's end at the end of the four thousand year era, waning shadows of former glory still flickered with a scaled-down skeletal Second Temple and *Sanhedrin*. The moon and stars provided a sporadic reminiscence of the last Jewish kings and Talmudic scholars. Night fell as the Second Temple burned to the ground, scattering disgorged, groping Jews in exile's pitch black hours.

On the fifth day fish and fowl swarmed. So too in the fifth millennium, the Land of Israel resembled oceans where big fish swallow littler ones whole. Countless marauding pretenders to Jerusalem staked specious claims. Each outdid its predecessor with more lies and thieving. Arrogant and adorning self-styled Caesars, caliphates and guardians all strutted upon the Jewish capital for a day.

34. This follows the Sages' understanding (*Bereshit Rabbah* 23:7) of Enosh's generation. In the sixth *aliyah* below, Abravanel offers a different interpretation which better hews to a straightforward understanding of the verse describing Enosh's epoch.

Big game and man were created on Day Six. The early period of the six thousandth year witnessed the emergence of modern and sectarian statehood. Man, the crowning accolade in Hashem's plan matches up with *mashiach*. Finally a leader worthy of taking control will reach the top sometime during the millennium. By consensus, an unparalleled king will unite a formerly incorrigible world. Commanding a small remnant of scattered, but loyal Jews, *mashiach* will capture and regain Israel, subjugating the faking squatters. Reminiscent of Adam's utopian Garden in Eden, Israel will flourish and prosper during this epoch.

In conclusion, understanding *Shabbat*'s Day Seven complexities and intricacies takes various layers into consideration. On this subject, the Sages expound upon three dimensions, ranging from the straightforward through the mystical to the highly symbolic and allegorical. Reviewing *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*'s approaches, one can trace the compatibility of and support for what has been written above concerning *Shabbat*'s rich and multiple meanings.

Second *aliyah*

'This is the history [engendered by] heaven and earth from when they were created, from the day that Hashem Almighty made earth and heaven.'

The pristine, untested state of worldly affairs before activation prefaces what appears to be a redo of creation. 'Every field's plant stood hibernating; leaves of grass had not yet grown' conveys an antsy world ready to burst. 'Hashem fashioned man… and placed him in Eden's garden.' The Torah reintroduces readers to Adam. This next episode featuring Adam, Chavah, elixir-potent fruit trees, and a villainous snake ranks as one of the most peculiar stories in the entire *Tanach*. It is not just bizarre. It stretches human reason to the very end of its tether. Justifiably the student asks: Is this for real?

Classic commentators line up and take sides answering that very question. Did the Eden story factually unfold as portrayed? Not incidentally, some famous Jewish commentators[35] lacked resolve or clarity with regards to the Garden episode, deciding to skip it altogether or offer scanty coverage. Diametrically opposing positions argue vehemently and passionately.

35. *Ramban* and *Ran*

Literalists, on one side, take Eden's events at face value. Man, Woman, Garden, Trees, Snake etc. As is. Tropologists take the second extreme. They would have us believe Eden as metaphor and allegory, with more than a tad of homiletic. As a sampling of the proof material, the Sages[36] place Eden's timing at Day Six. They assert that the day was loaded with activity in order to conclude Adam's creation, marriage, sin and exile, all of which occurred in a few, short hours. This crammed timing led the Rambam[37] towards the Eden-as-allegory team.

Both rabbinic traditions are weighty. A heated discussion comes down to more than a willingness to abandon fundamental intelligence as we know it. The flip side of the equation is no less than this: Can Torah's reliability and integrity be questioned with impunity? If Torah is poetry and figurative then are the six hundred and thirteen commandments also high, grand literature? Truth be told, the Rambam's opinion is defensible on the grounds of having particular reasons,[38] coupled with ample evidence from the Sages' statements, that this specific story ought to be interpreted allegorically. Slippery slopes leading to heretical netherworlds are thus de-iced.

Nonetheless, for our discussion purposes, a most satisfactory approach to Eden rests on an excellent synthesis, soon to be explored. By adopting an integrated position, the Torah's style remains consistent throughout all of *Chumash*. One need not switch tracks, reading some chapters literally and others figuratively. Common threading runs from the beginning to end.

To be sure, the Garden story has different aspects, but that cannot nullify its straightforward and literal approach. As a rule, if *Tanach* intends on cutting out human reason in a particular story, then a verse should clearly preface it as a vision or dream. That way the student has been amply intellectually prepared for the need to suspend cognition. For example, Yaakov's dream[39] contains a ladder planted on earth and stretching to the heavens. This is allegorical and the Torah flags it as such by introducing the story as a dream. The Eden narrative has no such marker.

The exquisite beauty and marvel of the Torah lie in the fact that it contains so many layers. In contrast, other great secular classic works of literature

36. BT *Sanhedrin* 38b
37. *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:29–30
38. Namely, the story's blatant bizarreness, along with the apparently superfluous repetition of Adam and Chavah's creation.
39. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*

lack full-bodied wholeness. Some philosophic writing is expansive and others wax poetic. Single dimensional genres are stiff, lacking, well, Divine range and breadth.

One Sage[40] described Torah's kernel metaphorically, as if reminiscent of man's. Readily apparent to man's peers are his clothes, but can one seriously advance a position asserting that a person's outfit captures man's inner-self? If anything his body pertains more to a person's very being. Yet how does a skin-deep viewing add anything to accurately define an individual's essence? So what is man's core? A human soul – an eternal sanctuary – etches him best.

Torah, too, must be viewed this way. Words provide first impressions, and delving into their meaning serves to introduce readers to a narrative's outer garments. The overall content of a story gives an accurate but superficial sketch. A deeper understanding of a *perek* or *parashah* is their meat and beef. Patient reflection of the Torah's timeless message brings readers closer to the eternal kernel elusively hiding, sparkling.

Two distinct directions thus emerge. Textual study aims at coming to grips with the plain *pshat* through reason. A second emphasis incorporates higher planes of awareness and appreciation. Our exegesis commences with Eden's straightforward gist laid bare, followed by exposing its soul.

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The eternal Torah imparts crucial information especially for Jews to learn and internalize. Note how scant explicit treatment of Hashem's heavenly facilitators and workings is recorded in the *parashah*'s opening chapter. Earthly matters are similarly adumbrated. Man's ontogeny is much more in keeping with Torah's aims. An abbreviated creation story outlining Day One progresses to life forms on the succeeding days in one Biblical chapter's blink of an eye. A still shot or two of Adam and Chavah serve the Torah's goals better because *Bereshit* can be viewed and traced along moral evolutionary lines. Early man's failure to thrive is, alas, a fair starting point. More than a symptom, human debacle is pandemic.

A sweeping preview of the aftermath of Eden's sin provides a bird's eye view of Jewish destiny. From a religious perspective, the world, post-sin, was in desperate need of a quick fix. A human resource replay highlights the

40. See *Zohar Behaalotcha*

processes that picked and chose, thinned and winnowed, an ever tightening thread. Humbled Adam and Chavah's second attempt at couplehood repaired a breach with their third son Shet. Shet's descendants pass through to Noach. Noach's choice son, Shem, walked Hashem's preferred path. Avraham's appearance is a breath of fresh air, representing a hope for all humanity. Finally a moral selective process loosened and discarded all but Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. With Yaakov's descendants, ethical evolution ended as the twelve sons became the twelve tribes in Canaan. The Book of *Bereshit* concludes with them in Egypt. The Torah's second book, *Shmot*, tells the entire miraculous redemption story, Mt. Sinai revelation, and desert wandering. A Jewish Nation, though small, was readied for carrying Hashem's word and task to a world – though a most reluctant one. Thus, when the Torah writes about the heavenly and earthly events, a very specific meaning is alluded to. A grand introduction to the Torah's ultimate message is presented. It refers to the authentic purpose of the Divine plan and places humanity at the front and center stage. In effect, all of the heavenly and earthly apparatus has the Jewish story in mind because Jews are inextricably intertwined and linked with the Divine program.

'This is the history [engendered by] heaven and earth from when they were created, from the day that Hashem Almighty made earth and heaven.' The Sages[41] questioned whether heaven or earth was created first and it seems they found a middle ground. The heavens technically preceded the earth with regards to the *ex nihilo* reference, which in this verse is referred to as "creation." However when it came down to forming, fashioning and forging primordial elements ("Hashem Almighty *made*"), Hashem began with the earthly domain.

The Biblical chapter's anthropocentric thrust is striking and undeniable. Man's mission statement in Hashem's world is to imitate the Creator. Specifically, man is entrusted with the task of perfecting his soul's spark towards recognizing and knowing the Maker in every imaginable and rational way. This presupposes a world totally compatible with sustaining man's body and soul. Mankind was effortlessly presented a perfect garden, a natural and harmonious fit. Adam would not physically, so to speak, have to lift a finger to prosper and succeed. The unhindered pursuit of a spiritual existence beckoned man.

41. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:15

Some basic instruction and how-to principles came along with the territory. It included a directive to partake of the physical world moderately and reasonably. Attachment to or excess of nature's sweeter treats were discouraged. Adam understood that the Creator wanted a preponderance of spirituality and religious introspection with a smattering of earthly delights for good measure. Divine communiqué told man that earthly distractions come at the expense of higher pursuits.

From the outset, negligent and myopic Adam and Chavah rebelled against themselves and Hashem. Flouting their destiny and calling, the first pair randomly tripped themselves on garden paths where not a single stone or stumbling block lay. General troubleshooting guidelines indicate where a man is liable to fail spiritually and transgress. Six areas are marked as hazardous. Adam and Chavah were nowhere near those landmines that include the following:

- Man may erringly take excessive pride in family lineage. This is evidenced at the end of this *parashah* culminating in lopsided marriages.
- A lousy place, location or environment can induce transgression. In *Parashat Lech Lecha*,[42] the episode of Lot in Sedom serves as an illustration.
- Dire straits and desperation drive a person to do wrong.
- Constant pampering and the easy life spoil character. Man must experience adversity to appreciate its absence.
- Ignorance and inadequate knowledge sidetrack unsuspecting simpletons.
- Succumbing to duress or pressure from people in positions of authority contributes to man's folly.

Adam and Chavah's mistakes were self-inflicted, lacking any of the six general categories listed, as will be explained at different points throughout this narrative. In fact, the inverse is true. Man had it made. This categorized their sin as especially egregious and deserving of severe punishment.

The issue of when the world became operational has been discussed above. *Bereshit*'s initial creation narrative describes a general order of heavenly

42. Chapter three, third *aliyah*

and earthly creations. The subsequent storyline assumes the business of activation. At this point in history, fields, plants, bushes, and grass sprouted but had not yet begun natural growth and reproduction because 'Hashem did not water the soil.' In addition, 'there was no man.' The Almighty wanted to work, knead the earth to facilitate flora function, and to forge first man. Dampness was deemed indispensable. Therefore a nondescript moisture or 'vapor arose from the ground and [brought about rain which] watered the earth.' Beyond the resulting boggy vegetation benefits, it served a far loftier purpose. 'The Almighty Creator fashioned man from earth's dust, blowing vital life-giving soul energy… and Adam came to life.' This verse describes man's transformation from inanimate dust to animate anthropoid.

Summarizing, creation can be understood this way. For the first six days, the will of the Creator sustained all existence. That Divine will provided potential and a reality that preceded natural existence. An integral part of vegetation's natural function is moisture, so rainfall was needed to set that in motion. But there was another, paramount purpose for the misty vapor. The Garden's formation figured prominently. Certainly Adam, whose physical composition required blending the earth's dust with water, depended on it no less than the vapor or moisture promoted garden growth.

From an anthropocentric point of view, the current passage is telling. The other creations' physical constitutions were forged solely from Day One's heaven and earth. But man got the VIP treatment. The Almighty actively participated in his physical formation by triggering the very first rainfall, utilizing the resulting clay concoction to mold first man. One other very circumscribed creation received such special attention – the Garden of Eden. It too was fashioned, not just sustained and activated as other plant life, with that same rainfall.

These verses seem, prima facie, erroneously cut and pasted from where they belong – the creation narrative. But they are placed here by way of introduction to the pivotal human interest narrative – man entangled in Eden's prohibited tendrils. One might also interpret these verses as focusing exclusively on the Garden's needs – sustenance (water) and a caretaker (man).

As mentioned above regarding Adam and Chavah's disgrace, a sinister aspect insinuates itself because none of the six sin-points were present. The first potential pitfall was a non-starter because man had no reason to gloat

about his pedigree. He was derived from earth's dust. Conspicuously missing from the second reference to Adam's making is a description of the Almighty's likeness and Divine image. That is because his mistake ruined his heavenly visage; the verse disparages of mankind.

The Torah's description of enlightened man's creation makes it an almost logic-defying task to try to understand what happened to Adam in Eden. What got into him? The life-giving verse telegraphs man's near endless potential. 'The Almighty breathed a soul of life into man.'

Aristotle asserted that the Creator put together a menu of three lifestyles from which people can choose: a) They can live like animals, in the proverbial gutter b) A better selection would be conducting oneself in a rational, dignified, socially graceful manner c) The choicest lifestyle dish would be a life of sublime, religious contemplation, and behavior. The Almighty infused and electrified man with a soul of life – he has mobility and freedom of choice which is unknown to animals.

Eden was, among other adjectives, a veritable wonderland. The second impulse for sin due to an unfavorable environment did not apply. Nothing good lacked in the Garden or was in short supply. The Hebrew word "Eden" ascribes the place's gentle refinement (*ednah*). Indigenous, pristine, and natural Eden beauty had been planted by Hashem's hands, so to speak, on the sixth day.

The commentators' consensus holds that the Garden's location was situated near the equator where day and night share the same length. Two final Eden observations suggest that Adam was not created in the Garden but moved there from elsewhere. Second, the chronology puts both Adam and Eden as sixth-day creations, with man preceding Eden.

When the Torah writes that the Garden's trees 'were pleasing to look upon and good to eat' the third reason for man to err slipped away. Adam did not lack for sustenance or livelihood. Ever available and plentiful, obtaining food presented no problem. Culinary delight matched salubrious benefit. Aesthetically enchanting trees and polychrome flowers filled out a most tranquil ambience. The 'Tree of Life' hints at medicinal or healing virtues. The 'central placement' may refer to all edible and elixir trees. Adam needed not go far to enjoy succulent fruits. At least metaphorically, the Life Tree's midpoint location teaches a moral about moderation as a rule to proper constitution and success. Strikingly,

'the Knowledge Tree of good and evil' did not occupy a prime, central Garden location. That tree, consistent with its inherent danger, lay at the Garden's outer regions. Though planted in the Garden, it was, nevertheless, marginalized. It was a literal and figurative extremity and appendage.

With a much more than adequate food supply, Eden had fresh water aplenty as a mighty river ran through it, eventually branching off to irrigate an entire world. The four river offshoots are: *Pishon*, *Gichon*, *Chidekel* and *Prat*. Some ancient historians and explorers have tried to identify them, respectively, as the Ganges, Nile, Tigris and Euphrates. Legends and folklore tell of the rivers' powers and qualities. The Torah itself hints that gold, crystal, and precious stones would be swept up in *Pishon*'s rushing torrents, depositing them in the Garden for its inhabitants to enjoy.

The Torah writes for a second time that Adam was placed in the Garden. Note an addition. Hashem Almighty 'placed the man there for the purpose of working and guarding' Eden. Adam's *work* meant that he was allowed and supposed to eat permissible fruit (*not very hard labor*!). By contrast, *guarding* referred to refraining from eating the forbidden fruit. That way, Hashem tested Adam. Alternatively, the verse's two verbs to work and guard do not relate to the Garden, but rather to Adam's very existence and mettle. Seeing that Adam had every conceivable creature comfort at his fingertips, Hashem challenged and exercised man's resolve. In Eden's worry-free environment, working and guarding referred to maintaining vigilance of the soul.

The continued narrative of Adam – transplanted and gainfully employed – highlighted why the fourth cause of sin did not apply. Namely, Hashem did not spoil or overindulge Adam. In a sense, man was put to the grind, commanded to work and guard. Adam's story was one of humble roots, a poor displaced person. Self-sustaining Eden may have contributed to Adam sensing something akin to what foreign workers experience. Alien status, as opposed to lordship, characterized his lot.

The Garden's Tree of Life potential for Adam presents an interesting question. The Sages[43] wrote that had man not transgressed, he could have become immortal and dodged death. Such speculation requires clarifying. It is not that man would have become like, say, non-temporal celestial bodies. Rather, human immortality would have stemmed from permanent protection

43. BT *Shabbat* 55b

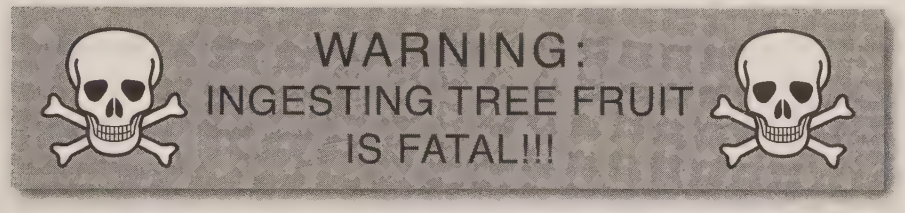
from external causes of death and abundant, amazing regenerative powers to prevent internal deterioration and demise. To provide perspective, death shadows man if there is an accident or outside cause. Hashem would be on constant vigil, so to speak, to prevent any of that. Mortality can be the result of bodily strain, exertion, disease or sickness. A harmful environment, adverse weather conditions or contaminated foodstuff are also liable to contribute to death. Verily, eating is the lesser of two evils. A person has to eat, or he will perish. But food's restorative powers do not grant a newborn babe's vitality. Old cells die, and grub-generated new ones are not quite as hale and hearty. A protected setting such as Eden's may have warded off the 'natural' causes of fatality as well. The Life Tree provided, in a manner of speaking, *the* antioxidant par excellence. Ingesting its free-hanging fruit wrought radical anti-ageing wonders. The salutary Garden had the ability to retard and stay ageing processes.

But immortality did not happen because Adam shunned the life-giving tree. His inclinations and machinations brought him to Eden's contentious Knowledge Tree of good and evil. Much has been written about the Knowledge Tree that tripped and threw down original man. The key, plainly enough, hangs from the tree's name. The knowledge referred to is physical intimacy – sexual intercourse. *Tanach* broadly uses the verb "to know" in order to indicate intimacy.[44] In the Garden, the Knowledge Tree of good and evil had characteristics that, in modern parlance, would correspond to a potent aphrodisiac or colloquially, some kind of "Spanish Fly." The Torah was crystal clear that only eating the fruit was forbidden. The human need for love and intimacy was, of course, a given. Toward that end, the Knowledge Tree was meant to be enjoyed. The touch, smell, and even caress of Knowledge Tree fruits were permissible, even encouraged. Given the concentration provided by that tree, even those actions would be sufficient to arouse Adam and Chavah's amorous feelings for each other. In moderation, the Knowledge Tree fruit was "good." To be sure, Hashem proscribed *ingesting* the Knowledge Tree's fruit because its potency would effectively relegate the first pair to a couple of animals in heat. Sexual cravings and acts would be totally blown out of any sense of proportion, leading to reason's and judiciousness' disregard. Such substance abuse

44. E.g. 'Adam knew his wife Chavah' – sixth *aliyah* below

justifies the tree title's sinister side. Read: the Knowledge Tree of *potential* good or *potential* evil.

Humanity's first couple was not clothed because the original plan called for a different type of life and calling. Sexual intimacy and reproduction was supposed to be totally natural and discreet, free of hype, pretense, exaggeration, or guilt. Abstinence was never even remotely contemplated. Propagating life meant expansion and smart growth – and was a Divine blessing. This helps explain why, in the first place, the Knowledge Tree existed in Eden. It had function and benefit. Concern for sexual intoxication and obsessive fixation made eating the fruit outlawed. Hashem was after balance and harmony.



The Torah warned that the day Adam eats the forbidden fruit will be the day that he 'dies.' Owing to the Knowledge Tree's nature, eating of its fruit threatened to throw man out of kilter. From the moment of consumption and on, immortality would be lost. Overindulgence in sex acts would sap his vitality. Ultimately, the nectar would destroy him. Adam and Chavah would also be banished from the Garden, deprived of a calm life in pursuit of ideals. Divine Providence would be sacrificed as its natural place rested within the confines of a good Garden life. Outside of Eden, life's vagaries and vicissitudes lurked, hid, and ambushed vulnerable man.

It can now be ascertained that Adam's sin did not occur because of the fifth contributory factor. Adam was far from ignorant of his transgression's consequences. Hashem told him explicitly of the dire punishment that would accompany his folly.

'Almighty Hashem declared that it was not good for man to live alone.' Chavah is introduced as Adam's partner. The honeymoon did not last for she caused his decline. Chavah had been intended for Adam's benefit and wellbeing. It didn't happen. She brought malfeasance. Living alone was not ideal, yet Adam's life with Chavah was, initially, an experiment that went haywire.

What did Hashem's master plan for their early relationship reveal? 'I will make him a helper to complement him.' Two things emerged. First, we

must contend with the fact that man is meant to pursue higher ideals and that heavenly communion is supremely valued. While it is lamentable that marriage and children can distract man from undertaking that noble pursuit, still and all, Hashem acknowledged that man should not go it alone. Practical and domestic considerations, at least, dictate a tradeoff. A partner willing to undertake and shoulder the lion's share of home and chores in order to assist man's noble pursuit is crucial. A shared goal with defined roles bespeaks a complementary and more perfect union. In a Garden world, woman would approach the role positively, deriving satisfaction from the performance of a particular job well done.

The second thing to learn about man and woman is that which sets human relationship's vastly apart from animal's typical mating and reproductive patterns. Hashem was adamantly against people forming casual sexual relationships – even for purposes of reproduction. The Maker had in mind something far different and far-reaching. Namely, man and woman are bidden to attain closeness, friendship, love, and intimacy. In a word, couplehood is an intrinsic value. Existentially, man longs for woman's companionship and sharing that far exceeds and dwarfs sexuality. The Sages[45] have taught that although man and woman could have been created separately, Hashem chose to forge one from the other – in expression of their intense unity. Though appearing elusive, master couplehood is attainable.

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'Hashem Almighty had formed all wild beasts and birds of the sky from the earth. He brought them to man to see what he would call them. All living beings that were named by Adam had been called by their [essential] name.'

An important introduction is appropriate to help explain these passages. Hebrew is special on many levels. That was the language with which Hashem communicated with Adam. The Creator entrusted Adam with the job of naming and calling to all of the animals and birds. But it was not a random exercise in nomenclature or classification. Hashem programmed and wired man in such a way that human cognition matched the Hebrew language's magic to get to a thing's essence. Instructively, Hebrew words taught about the thing itself. Etched in man's psyche was imparted knowledge that brought

45. BT *Eruvin* 18a

to light the hidden attributes of objects, animals, and the world at large. Thus Adam could see an aardvark, for example, and retrieve the Hebrew word for aardvark. Ditto for zebra. In this way, Hashem imbued man with the ability to synchronize with his environment. Part of man's creation in the Almighty's image meant that a shared language existed.

It is imperative, then, to differentiate Hebrew from other languages and dialects. A vibrant philosophical discussion of philology is insufficient. When Hashem asked Adam to call animals and birds "by name" it was not an exercise in convenience or popular consent. Adam did not randomly call animals by abstract names and teach them to his wife and children for mere practical consideration. Rather, Adam named them in a way that was wholly, naturally compatible with the object at hand. The assumption is that Hashem communicated in Hebrew with Adam, who in turn conversed with Chavah (and later their sons) in the Divine tongue. A select cadre of individuals would later pass this language to the patriarchs and matriarchs who in turn taught their children the *lingua sancta*. It resurfaced publicly to a Jewish nation at Mount Sinai – all versed in Hebrew. As a written word too, Hebrew letters were engraved in the tablets Moshe received.

The passages can now be elucidated. On creation's Day Five and Six, animals and man were made. Later when Hashem directed Adam to call the arriving animals and birds by name, man needed to do a reality check, a diagnostic exam of sorts. That is, did Adam speak the creation language? Could Adam jive consistency of name with object? In other words, did man's conception of spoken dialect match with the Hebrew that created the heavens and earth?

To Adam's credit, he got it. He comprehended Hebrew's esoteric role in the Divine scheme. Adam called an animal by name. That *really* was its name, essence, purpose.

Third *aliyah*

'And the man gave names to all of the animals and birds of the heaven and to all of the animals of the field; and Adam found no helpmate.'

Man's familiarity with animals tipped him off that they could never be his intimate partner and best friend. Tellingly, Hashem also had this in mind when Adam underwent the language drill. Woman could be fully appreciated by man only after experiencing profound frustration and hopelessness in a futile soulmate quest. Hence we do not find Adam attaching appellations to heavens, plants, objects or fish. Stars, salads, stones, and squid were not contemplated as spouses.

On a more profound level, Hashem was testing Adam. Man's calling out to animals would be, in essence, an inner-self call of identity. Would he find compatibility with beasts and animals? Is he so bound to mundane existence? Man passed with flying colors. His lofty destiny and awareness dictated that he recoil from a deep emotional attachment to any heretofore existing creature. A sublime stage was set for Hashem's direct intervention. A wife would be formed anew.

'Hashem anesthetized Adam and he slept.' Hashem induced Adam's slumber for three reasons. First, in concession that first impressions are important, Hashem did not want wakeful Adam to behold Chavah's "conception, development, and rejuvenation process" from his rib cage bone before his very eyes. Embryogeny may have unsettled him. Second, an aware Adam would have experienced severe pain, if not agony, as the surgery was being performed. Lastly, a romantic excitement became greatly enhanced when the novelty of surprise brought Chavah and Adam together. The coy mystique of a totally unexpected first meeting clinched the marriage.

The verse attributes Adam's deep sleep to the Almighty as if his slumber was unnatural. Hard sleep patterns are generally associated with overeating and drinking. Since Eden's food nourished lightly and efficiently, Adam's sleep pattern likely would have been more catnap-like had the Maker not induced a deep sleep.

Hashem created Chavah from Adam's rib bone. This contributed and helped define the feminine role, sexuality, and desire. For man, losing part of himself to woman gave focus to the relationship. In particular, Chavah would seek reattachment to her source while Adam would assume the part of protector,

guardian, and provider. His love, devotion and caring for his wife/partner grew naturally, as if it were a matter of self-preservation. Employing homiletics stemming from observation of the verse's verb choice, the Sages[46] connect "women's intuition" (*binah*) to the observation that Chavah was built (*vayiven*) from Adam's rib bone. In addition, Chavah's development from a rib bone and not from other body parts or bones suggests equality. Couples walk side by side.

It is likely that Adam was created with a spare rib to donate for the purposes of spouse creation. Man lacked nothing from the rib bone's removal. It promoted life in another human without detracting from the donor. But that rib was no less essential to Adam than semen is part and parcel of all males, preserved and protected for future propagation.

Technically, it happened that the rib bone that built Chavah came with attached flesh. Thus, a human skeletal regeneration replete with flesh took place. Medically and scientifically, of course, there is no way to explain, for example, Chavah's development of organs or a vascular system out of flesh and bone. Undeniably, Divine will and Divine work miraculously put woman together.

The Almighty brought newly created Chavah to Adam. With some resignation, Adam originally thought that Chavah's approach was also for the purpose of testing nomenclature as described earlier. Immediately, Adam recognized Chavah's essential being as near identical to that of his own. The Torah records 'this time the bone is as mine; the flesh my own flesh.' In addition to acutely feeling a mirror image, Adam made another observation. Woman would never be created again from man's bone and flesh. The exercise would remain unique. It suggested to Adam that if a couple can be so closely interwoven then 'man should leave his parents, cleaving to his woman.'

The Hebrew spelling for man (*ish*) and woman (*ishah*) highlights that woman 'was taken from [a part of] man.' In comparison, the Greek words for man and woman do not share the same pronunciation or spelling (man is *andros* or *anthro*; woman is *genie* or *genia*). Some commentators[47] and the Sages[48] before them considered this solid evidence of the Holy Tongue being the earliest language. This enlightening etymology elucidates many of this *parashah*'s name nuances. The Hebrew proper names for Adam, Chavah, Shet, Kayin, Noach and Peleg lose much in translation. The Hebrew verbs associated

46. *Bereshit Rabbah* 18:1
47. *Kuzari* 2:68, cited by *Ibn Ezra Bereshit* 2:23
48. *Bereshit Rabbah* 18:4

with those proper names sound and are practically spelled the same. They are extracted and chiseled from those same base letters. This provides further evidence for the *lingua sancta*'s primacy.

One could perhaps contend that the original language of man was not Hebrew, and the Torah was written in a foreign tongue. Perhaps in the original language, the terms for male and female were also virtual homonyms. The proper names, and the message behind them, have been translated into Hebrew. Given the sampling of Hebrew proper nouns listed above with verbs sharing the same word roots, statistically it appears less likely, albeit a possible hypothesis. It is much more compelling to conclude that today's Hebrew corresponds to the original language spoken by the first man and woman. But there is another angle to this proof that makes the case in favor of Hebrew constituting the original dialect.

Conventional wisdom teaches that when history books or philosophic treatises mention people by name, those proper names get handed down according to their original and local names. That is why regardless of the particular language translation, Plato will be passed down as Plato (or close enough to it). The same goes for Alexander the Greek or Julius Caesar. When the Torah is discussed, then, the identical assumption follows. That is, proper nouns are authentic. Thus, the patriarch's names are not borrowed or contrived, but are exactly the given names. So often, names were associated with events. Yitzchak, Yaakov, Reuven, Shimon, to mention a few reflect laughter or heel of a foot etc. Translators cannot reproduce the biological parent's intent when naming a child. For example, Yitzchak means laughter. Other languages do not match Yitzchak with laughter, which was the precise sentiment of Sarah when she named her son. Rather awkwardly, the translator will write that Sarah called her son Isaac because everyone will laugh. There is no fundamental connection; it is a total non sequitur. Another example is Moshe. In Hebrew, Moshe's name fits because the Hebrew verb is to "draw out" (*meshitihu*).[49] This reflects baby Moshe drawn out of the Nile's water.[50] But the Aramaic translation (*shechalteih*) has nothing to do, etymologically, with "Moshe." Even non-Jewish subjects that come up in *Tanach* like Yitro, Reuel, Bilam, Balak, Sichon, Og and Paroah are all the original names as their own peoples and histories wrote

49. *Shmot* 2:10
50. Cf. *Ibn Ezra* ad loc.

about them. When Moshe, the consummate prophet, recorded stories about them, he used their original Midianite or Moabite names.

The crux of the matter is this. The Torah's assertion that man dubbed woman *ishah* means this was her *proper* name. Since this proper name is cognate with *ish* in Hebrew alone, the Sages were able to confidently determine that Hebrew was the first language. To briefly sum it all up, when Adam gave Chavah her name he reflected upon the indisputable fact of their commonality. And that works and matches when we understand Hebrew's finer points.

Note that mankind is forever called man and woman even though the original event is ancient history. Today, humanity is propagated through ovum and sperm. Woman, per se, has nothing to do with man's rib bone just as man has precious little to do the with the reddish earth clay that went into Adam's body.[51] For commemorative value man is eternally *ish* (in Hebrew) and woman is forever *ishah*.

Although female animals were not forged from their male counterparts, they essentially share the same name (e.g. bull and cow are called *par* and *parah* respectively). This is because animals only have a generic name, shared by the male and female, save the final feminine letter. Humankind, however, has a generic species name *in addition* to male/female differentiation. (Interestingly, in several languages there is a general word for humanity in contrast to the individual male and female designations. For brevity, one example suffices. In Latin, the generic human species' name is *homo* versus the male word *masculo* and female word *femina*.) The Hebrew language's similarity – *ish/ishah* – at the gender differentiation level, sharply contrasts with other languages' terminology in this regard, and provides the basis for the Sages' assertion of Hebrew's primacy discussed above.

No sooner than the first humans meet and are introduced does the Torah teach about future couples leaving their parents and cleaving to each other. The import is that marriage in those first generations existed with an idiosyncrasy. Prohibited incest precluded only mother/son and father/daughter. Brother and sister unions were an exigency later voided and outlawed. Understood simply, the Torah's observation of abandoning parents meant that spouses' love would surpass parental affection.

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51. אדם - אדמה

'Therefore man will leave his parents, cleaving to his woman. They become one flesh.' This may refer to offspring strengthening marital bonds.[52] The natural closeness Adam and Chavah enjoyed by dint of their being literally carved of the same flesh would be experienced by later generations via children. Another yet more straightforward explanation can be offered. First man had no qualms about severing his family ties with his "bio parents": mother earth's dust and father's moisture that had mixed to form Adam. All future couples' collective mindset follows Adam and Chavah's love for each other. Just as it was possible for Adam and Chavah to emotionally break from their (nonhuman) progenitors, so too it is possible to break parental emotional bonds and commit to marriage.

Of course, marriages can be positive or negative, beneficial or poisonous, harmonious or adversarial. The deciding factor hinges on what the Sages[53] called the infusion of the Divine element. If Divine goals are a couple's priority, then marital tranquility is achieved. A lack of Divine objectives in couplehood invites unnatural misery. When spouses are at loggerheads the relationship is out of kilter bringing in the sixth and final reason that might lead man to sin. That is, Chavah plucked from Adam's rib bone should have established her willing and loving subservience. The first couple's sin, then, is testimony that it had nothing to do with a confused hierarchy or a skewed chain of command. If Adam heeded Chavah's seduction, it was not a case of harassment from a senior officer or commander. Minimally, man was Chavah's equal and not lackey.

Initially the couple was not wearing clothes and had no compelling reason to fuss with it. There was no embarrassment whatsoever because, on many levels, they felt so close. Which person feels shame when he is undressed alone? Essentially, feelings of inadequacy and shame are artificial and societal. Man and woman predated plastic conventions. The Sages[54] added another thought. Pristine Adam and Chavah were glossed and filmed with a spiritual type of garment layer. After their rebellion and as punishment, however, they were stripped of the original heavenly mantle. Their shame was an expression of feeling naked and bereft of that honorable covering. The import is profound. Clothing accomplishes two things. One, it protects against elements that are liable to burn or freeze flesh. Two, clothing projects honor and status. Naked

52. *Rashi*
53. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 12
54. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 14

and barefoot, a man feels worthless and cheap. A wardrobe that is out of style, garments that are incorrectly sized bespeak an uncouth person, an outcast.

Pre-fall man rose above the culture of couture. Revealing human genitalia was no different than hands without gloves, feet without stockings. Man's transgression significantly altered his physiology. Skin lost its vitality, verve and spunk. The damaged dermatology depended on clothing to protect it from climate hazards.

§§§

A Garden snake approached Chavah. Many theories have been advanced about this creature described as wily, slick and crafty. Some commentaries[55] understand that snakes were intelligent, speech-capable bipeds prior to Hashem's curse truncating their minds and legs. Others[56] suggest that Eden's snake was Satan incarnate. As written above, the Rambam relegated this narrative to allegory's realm. All of these opinions fail in either plausibility or exegetical consistency. In fact, the snake story is a pivotal one to understanding a greater context of man and woman in the Almighty's creation.

The premise presumes that reptiles, like any other animal, cannot talk. Wily ones are no exception. The snake did not talk to Chavah nor did Chavah talk to the snake. Were such an impossibility to occur, the Torah would have prefaced the miracle with words to the effect that Hashem opened the snake's mouth so it could talk. That introduction would provide ample warning that an extraordinary event was about to unfold and that humans need to temporarily suspend reason for a specific aim. When Bilam's ass talked, the verse states clearly: 'And Hashem opened the ass's mouth.'[57]

Chavah saw the snake and fantasized the entire anthropomorphic thing. *She* put, as it were, words in the snake's mouth. Why? Woman saw this snake climbing and slithering up the Knowledge Tree, eating of the tree's forbidden fruit. It ate and ate and yet did not die nor even show signs of debilitation.

The Torah records what appeared to be a bona fide conversation replete with he said this and she said that. Dialogue-sounding words do not represent an insurmountable problem. Countless examples of anthropomorphisms dot *Tanach*. Sometimes it is in the form of the great whales' religious praise or

55. *Ibn Ezra*
56. *Rabbeinu Sa'adyah Gaon* cited by *Ibn Ezra*
57. *Bamidbar* 22:28

field animals and forest trees bursting into cheer and song for the Creator. Clearly this is poetic license, meant to convey human awe at a beautiful world.

True, the snake of all animals created, is described as crafty or wily. But this does not mean that it could talk any more than it means it could dance. It does mean that the snake did climb the Knowledge Tree – something no other animal did do. It also means that the snake ate the tree's fruit – something else no animal did. As a result of these acts, Chavah attributed to the scaly reptile a snide, fresh and serpentine cocky gait.

The actual rationalization that Chavah foisted upon the snake takes two possible paths:

- Thinking to herself as if she was conversing with the snake, she imagined the snake taunt. 'Even though Hashem said you cannot eat from all garden trees, we eat from the garden tree.' Chavah heard herself responding to the snake's swank. She rationalized, exhorted, and maybe even felt indignant at the snake's impudence. 'The fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden, Hashem said not to eat nor touch, lest you die!'
- 'Isn't it true that Hashem told you not to eat from any garden trees?' The snake slithering brought a second look at the Divine commandment. What did it really mean? Was only the fruit outside the garden permitted? Reviewing, she concluded 'we can eat from the garden trees.' The Knowledge Tree was off limits – both ingestion and touch – due to lethal consequences.

If the assumption is correct, though, and the snake did not verbally seduce Chavah, what of the verses that describe the condemnation and punishment of the snake? Animals are not subject to commandments, free-will, or consequence. That question will be dealt with at that point in the narrative.

Why had Chavah fabricated the prohibition against eating the fruit by saying that merely touching the Knowledge fruit or tree was explicitly *verboten*? Woman's folly centered on a skewed perception of cerebral man as asexual. Projecting future frustration, she thought her husband would never desire her love and intimacy. Chavah's own anxieties needlessly led her down overly puritan paths. (As mentioned above, man was allowed to touch and smell the Knowledge Tree.)

All the while and in Chavah's mind, the snake was doing gymnastics on the Knowledge Tree's branches. The snake's snacking sounds suggested

lip-smacking succulence. Knowledge fruit juice teasingly coursed down its jowls. It was all too much for her to take. She imploded, but not before taking a swipe at her Maker. She imputed that 'You will not die. Rather, Hashem knows that the moment Knowledge fruit is tasted, human eyes will be enlightened. Man will be like the Almighty, knowing good and bad.'

What was Chavah thinking? She figured that if Hashem prohibited the fruit because it contained intrinsically noxious material, then why did the snake not reel from its ingestion? That being the case, its prohibition was not a protective commandment. Therefore it appeared that this exotic fruit was proscribed as Divine will. Hashem arbitrarily, she pouted, wanted to deprive humanity of a good thing fearing meddling into Hashem's domain, as it were.

A sip of the fruit's juices, Chavah schemed, and Adam would no longer aspire to loveless, introspective solitude. He would not be averse to Chavah but his eyes would finally be open, wildly mesmerized and distracted by her remarkable beauty.

Chavah toyed with open rebellion and mustered the inner resolve to propose a Divine duel with her Maker. The full swoop aimed at the Almighty. She concluded that one taste of the fruit – and immortality would be achieved. Humankind would ascend the godly ladder and co-assume the Divine mantle, fully capable of reproducing offspring. Adam's helpmate designate envisioned not a narrower world but instead a broader and grander one. Just as the Almighty created and fashioned a world filled with positive and negative aspects, a good and bad life would be their lot. Good in that they would procreate; bad insofar as rearing children presents challenging, hard work.

Convinced, 'the woman saw that the tree was eminently edible.' Chavah watched the Knowledge Tree's fruit being squandered on a lowly snake, thriving with vitality and so she vowed that it must be hers. The tree's eye-appeal grabbed her. For Chavah, the fruit was her muse and it lifted her mind to orgiastic galaxies where she philosophized and wrote high poetry. If the Almighty Himself called it The Tree of Knowledge, could there be any doubt that an ever greater understanding of good and evil would come with each bite?

And then she reached and tasted it for real. Chavah lost no time cajoling Adam to share her romantic, scandalous snack, thinking that the aphrodisiac was a dish needed to be shared by two.

They crashed.

Note that the verse states 'she took from its fruit.' It does not say that she took from the tree bark or made a tea infusion from its leaves. Chavah wanted a real trip. If the tree possessed powers, she reasoned, the most concentrated fruit part of the tree would be all the more mind-blowing. To cover her back, Chavah even contrived a constructed legal argument. The fruit was kosher because only "the tree" was prohibited.

She was a clever woman, maybe, but the simple facts of the case glared her down. A nasty miscalculation galloped full throttle into full-blown theological babble signifying nothing. A groundless power struggle fell flat. Chavah was an embarrassment and disgrace as the Knowledge fruit proved her undoing. She would not be the only one to fudge and twist when it suited her needs, but she certainly was the first one. Studying this story should give every human being pause and make it clear what miscalculation can bring. What greater travesty than to transgress Hashem's commandments?

Woman's folly in no way dismissed man's own guilt. The verses make it sound as if he was a willing accomplice and conspirator. Without the slightest compunction, subservient, floundering Adam unquestioningly obeyed Chavah's order as if breaking the Almighty's rule was of no consequence.

'Their eyes became enlightened.' With the Divine fusion of the relationship ruptured the two looked at each other's bodies, becoming sex-crazed. Any semblance of balance, harmony and Divine Providence walked away; it left them ungoverned. Each goo-goo eyeing the other 'they knew they were naked.' A strange mixture of passion, longing, and shame possessed them. Trying to alleviate the confusion, they patched together leaf waist belts to conceal their sexual organs as if this was their most prized jewel and important body part.

It is crucial to get the right read on the pair before and after their foolishness. Before the sin, Adam and Chavah had solid cognition and reasoning. Their knowledge was true and accurate but not the type that comes with experience. Their erstwhile sexuality had been proper and befitted their station. Practically, sexual intercourse took the natural course of an act with a goal towards procreation.

But after their fall, a fundamental change occurred. Man and woman arrived at their knowledge in a clumsy manner, almost like bumbling sophomores. Their natural brightness dissipated, leaving them groping at each other grotesquely. Their clothing was barely enough to keep them at arm's length.

Enthralled, the couple became wasted and spent. They were gluttonous and it was hideous. All their noble goals and hopes were totally dashed with nary a religious sentiment remaining. The Sages[58] expressed different opinions about how low the couple stooped, be it a denial of man's unique mission; defiance of Divine omniscience, or plain vanilla satyriasis.

Man and woman, beginning to sense their vulnerability, compared themselves to four-legged animals. And in comparing, the two felt queerly inadequate. Uncomfortably, they realized that there was no way to hide their private parts. The human coatless, furless body frame and posture exposed them maximally, heartlessly. While animals walked freely and naturally, man and woman had to constantly adjust and tuck. Assuming the forbidden fruit eaten was a fig, those leaves came in handy to quickly remedy the acute pangs of newfound insecurities.

Soon after eating the Knowledge Tree fruit and carnal binge, Adam and Chavah 'heard the Almighty's voice in the Garden.' Running, they dashed to take cover among Eden's trees. The scene began with Adam pacing a warm climate Garden in search of relief and a cool breeze. While Adam strolled, he sensed the Almighty's word breaking through to initiate a talk. The Sages[59] expounded that the verse offered insight into what disgraced man might have been thinking in the debacle's aftermath *(faker!)* and how Hashem followed through on meting out punishment (i.e., Adam did not perish on 'the day he partook of the tree' as Hashem had told him earlier, but lived for "a day" of Hashem – a millennium[60] – minus the seventy year lifespan granted his progeny). One thing is certainly clear. Even after mankind's first misstep, dialogue did take place and this is *Tanach*'s first recorded communication between the Maker and mankind.

Generally such prized, pithy and sparing prophetic dialogue is reserved for the holiest of men and women – a domain of advanced students of religious introspection and behavior. Why had Hashem bothered with this intoxicated and impudent couple? Two reasons. First, some venues are simply wired for it. Specifically, Eden's highly charged spirituality was conducive for high-level dialogue. Despite himself, Adam was in the right *place*. Eden's force boosted and levitated its residents to prophetic status. It essentially boiled down to

58. BT *Sanhedrin* 38b
59. *Bereshit Rabbah* 19:8
60. Cf. *Tehillim* 90:4, 10

a bonus religious freebie or spiritual giveaway. Second, prophecy can come down to not only the right place but also the right *time*. The complex verse says that Adam paced at his propitious 'prophecy hour of the day.' It appears that that particular time slot had been allotted and dedicated to Adam for purposes of a Divine conference. Again despite himself, Adam happened upon a fortuitous time zone pregnant with spiritual potential.

The first Divine rendezvous with man was kept, but not without more inane reluctance or bungling on Adam's part. (Technically, the first communication was a Heavenly reading of the Garden rules and regulations, but that was not a dialogue.) As if to highlight Adam's undeserving participation, the Torah shed more light on hapless man.

Adam actually tried to hide. Adding insult to injury, heretical Adam headed for the exact spot that most exposed his transgression as if fig leaves would protect the first fugitives. Of course Hashem called him out on it when the initial interrogative was fired at Adam 'Where are you?' Accusingly, Hashem asked him what business he has there next to the forbidden Knowledge Tree. Implied in the tone bellowed a charge: Adam, have you broken rules?

The interrogation was directed exclusively at Adam and not Chavah because he was more culpable, having received the directives. Surrendering his dorky safe haven, Adam emerged. Due process and trial time awaited the two alleged, charged defendants. Fair jurisprudence demands an opportunity for defense and the Heavenly Judge, despite His omniscience, played by the book.

The court case commenced and the prosecution asked why Adam was found frequenting the Knowledge Tree. *Planning a nosh, were you*? The comeback was breathtakingly brazen. Outrageous. *Eat of it!? Me!? Ludicrous.* 'I heard your commandment in the Garden and fear (breaking it)!' Lying through his teeth, Adam outright denied having eaten the forbidden figs. Hiding had nothing to do with the shame of sin, or iniquitous intent – said he – but the indignity of nakedness. (What nakedness? Had Adam and Chavah not covered their nudity with fig leaves? Adam meant that despite their scant clothing, the vast majority of his body remained exposed.)

The prosecution turned up the heat, deposed Adam: 'Who told you that you were naked?' Hashem punched holes in Adam's defense. Logic exposed the intrinsic contradictions because if Adam had not eaten the forbidden fruit, then he would not have known embarrassment at being undressed.

Fear, My Foot. Nailing Adam, Hashem reminded him that when the first directive had been issued, Adam was completely naked and yet felt no shame.

Unrelenting, the prosecution asked: 'Did you eat from the forbidden Knowledge Tree?' Because if he did and as a result it overcharged and overheated his libido, that would explain his shame that caused him to hide.

Exposed man threw in the towel, realizing that lies accomplished nothing. Shifting blame and trapped, Adam fingered Chavah. 'The woman that you supplied to me gave me the fruit and I ate it.' Man explained that he did not initiate the sin but rather woman incited and enticed a fatal deed. Adam's defense amounted to an attack on the Creator saying that his custom-made helpmate misled him. Shabby confessions do not cut muster, rendering them basically worthless. Not an ounce of contrition slipped from man's lips.

Turning to Chavah, the prosecution asked tersely: 'What did you do?' Implied in the charge is that Chavah essentially poisoned and killed her husband. Woman's defense took a leaf out of man's strategy book. She pointed to the serpent, saying that it had led her on to eat the proscribed figs. Adopting her husband's reasoning, Chavah played two cards. First, if Hashem accepted Adam's plea of incitement, then Chavah was also a victim of wile. Was it not identical? The snake enticed her with actions just as Chavah cajoled Adam with actions because without saying anything, she merely handed the fruit to her husband. As for the charges that she did the moral equivalent of manslaughter, Chavah adroitly deflected it because she, too, ate a fig. Hashem could not charge her with willful suicide. At the end of the day her legal wrangling and stratagem got her no further than her husband and accomplice.

The prosecution did not ask the snake for his version of the story because the animal only sought food and there was no moral or ethical wrongdoing. It was simply a matter of assuaging its hunger. The snake was nonetheless not absolved but cursed because the reptile was the instrument by which Adam and Chavah erred. Guilt by association implicated the snake.[61] Likewise, the Torah teaches that livestock must be slaughtered in Jewish towns where wide scale idolatry had been practiced.[62] For such circumstances, the Sages[63] coined an adage: "Woe to the evildoer and woe to evildoer's neighbor."

61. Cf. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 7:4
62. *Devarim* 13:13–19
63. BT *Succah* 56b

The discovery, testimony, and evidence gathered and studied, it was time for the prosecution to pass sentence. Going according to the chronology, the verdict – a curse – got handed down. The snake received his just deserts first. Since his crime centered on his *eating* of the Knowledge Tree's fruit (and not speech incitement, as explained above), he received one general punishment that had multifaceted ramifications. All animals including snakes were originally herbivores. Like eating habits and digestive systems lend to particular personality similarities. Thus, snakes should have had demeanors similar to other tame grazers. Carnivores stalk and kill prey, eating their meat and have aggressive natures. Herbivores, by contrast, are milder. Originally, the creation plan grouped snakes with the friendlier category. However, when the snake wrapped and wound himself in the center of the storm, Hashem changed his constitution. The punishment was not random, but quite measured. Seeing that the snake veered from normal grass and grazing diet and feigned to be a fruit eater, the consequence was a diet-related sentence. Earth's dust would be the snake's bill of fare. Apropos, his body would be adjusted accordingly. Instead of walking on fours, he would be cut down to size to fit his new lowly nourishment. It had been decreed that the snake 'would be the most accursed of all animals.' Herbs, grass, and the like were struck from the snake's new eating regime. Belly crawlers, by definition, are low lives. Their physiognomy betrays a bitter, depressed melancholy. As such, another sub-decree highlighted a permanent animus to mankind whose nature and design is one of balance and harmony. Man naturally recoils from snakes and an encounter with one leads to feelings of threat, fear, and loathing. For that reason the Torah teaches that man will seek to crush and bash a snake's head because that is its most dangerous and venomous region. In sum, when the snake stepped out of line, his punishment cut him down to size. This changed his basic nature which eventually and unavoidably led to mutual dread. The Sages[64] understood this curse further and explained that regardless of what a snake actually ingests, it assumes a chalky, dusty flavor.

Next it was Chavah's turn for ignominy and sentencing. Her situation was different than that of man because she had not heard the Garden rules directly. Notwithstanding this important distinction, Chavah was Adam's partner and spouse – for better and for worse. If Adam refrained from the Knowledge

64. Cf. BT *Yoma* 75b

Tree then by inference, empathy, and equality, Chavah should have kept her distance from the figs. How bonding would it have been had Chavah sufficed and shared Adam's food. Instead, she looked, so to speak, to wider horizons. Deliberately, she sought to take her man down forbidden, dark alleys.

As with the snake, Chavah's punishment was meted out measure for measure. Since the Knowledge Tree contained an aphrodisiac, woman ate and shared the fruit for three reasons. First, she craved enhanced eroticism; second, she badly desired children; third, she needed man's constant companionship and doting. Her curse reflected these three things. More pleasure and enjoyment would not be her lot because she would become more susceptible than man to pain and disease. Pain management would be harder for her constitution. If she wanted fertility and motherhood, it would come at great expense mostly accompanied with near unbearable pregnancies and excruciating childbirth. Furthermore, this must also take into account women's traditional and dominant role in childrearing which always takes a mighty, protracted toll. Finally, even an aim of securing an attentive marriage remained elusive because her needs for him outweighed his needs for her. Man is perceived as the dominant and domineering of the two. Chavah's ploy failed dismally. And all of this transpired after their sin because originally the plan envisioned a better quality of physical and married life for women. Original man and woman were supposed to share similar, if not identical, traits, needs, and resilience.

It seems that original woman was supposed to have a single pregnancy of twins and then not have more children. This concept presumed an undying mankind. On a practical level, having more children than that would create a population explosion. Post-sin wrought change, particularly with regards to mankind's mortality. As a result, women would need to conceive and deliver more babies to offset child mortality, disease, and illness. Woman's curse was a decree of increased pain associated with multiple pregnancies, childbirths, and the anguish of arrayed annoyances. And there was no relief in sight because instead of wanting to leave her husband and be rid of the birthing cycle, she grew needier of her man's loving and intimacy. The painful pregnancy pattern gripped tightly.

Hashem reserved the greatest wrath for Adam, by far the main culprit. The snake and Chavah were secondary accomplices. Two fundamental evils had been man-made. First, Adam obeyed Chavah's overtures instead of taking

charge. His subservience threw man's role out of kilter. He could not dedicate himself to higher aims if he balked and lost his self-reliance and independence. Second, Adam deliberately disobeyed his Maker who explicitly forbade the figs. His punishment carried five stripes. They are:

- cursed land, soil
- existential misery
- limited diet choices
- life of agricultural toil
- mortality

Hashem spelled out that a post-sin existence meant expulsion from the idyllic Garden life. The topsoil outside Eden was a mixed bag as farmer Adam would never quite know what his land might produce, if anything. There were too many variables and unknowns out of human control. If inside Eden life was calm and easy, outside of it was a nightmare. Family, society, and community were anything but civilized. There would be no single, solitary, safe spot. Within the Garden, variety was aplenty and all for the taking. But beyond Eden his diet resembled that of nut- and seed-gathering squirrels. If Eden promised peace, outsiders could expect backbreaking work with diminishing rates of return. Finally, if the Garden lengthened man's days, then the Garden lockout made life into short shrift. Concluding the punishment, the Torah writes Adam a script of misery 'until your return to the earth from whence you came because dust you are and to the dust you return.'

Man was his own undoing. His gross misapplication of creation's purpose beset great potential. He failed to thrive. Big time. Actually it seemed from Hashem's perspective that man as a prototype strived to fail. Comprised of equal parts of dust and eternal soul, he chose dust. Choice carries consequence and Adam slunk, soiled. Mistaken and calculating, the couple passed on glory and eternity. (The Sages,[65] based on a close analytical textual reading, list this as one of several *Tanach* sources that convey the Jewish tenet that subscribes belief in the ultimate revival of the dead.)

After hearing of the curse and punishment (there was no plea bargain or appeal), Adam came up with a name for his wife and 'man called his woman Chavah.' Chavah's given name implies an animal-loving person. Though originally man called her woman because of her likeness to him, post-sin a shift

65. *Bereshit Rabbah* 20:10

prompted him to re-think. He saw in his spouse an inordinate attachment to, or maternal attitude with the snake and by inference animals generally. This acknowledgement disappointed Adam because he had originally expected his life partner to rise higher than the animal kingdom. The Hebrew etymology for Chavah also points to her loquaciousness.

'Hashem Almighty made for man and woman leather clothing and garbed them.' The expulsion from Eden began with a new wardrobe. Protective covering was a must for the couple braving a cold world. The clothing idea is credited to Hashem and not to mankind because the couple's first balmy Garden clime did not bring rise to wear head-to-toe clothing. Even after their disgrace, they thought minimally and only in terms of sheer, belted leaves. Interestingly, this seemingly menial manufacturing came to be as a Divine *garmento* creation no less than the Creator's will produced six days of universe. The specific material of fur or dead animal leather was meant to jolt the couple in recognition of their ultimate demise. The garments served as a constant reminder that just as animals die and are forgotten, that fleeting fate will be shared by man.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And Hashem Almighty said, "Behold the man purports to be one of us knowing good and evil. He is liable to reach and take Life Tree fruit, gaining eternity."'

This short passage contains three verses and brings readers to the end of the Eden epoch. Let us assume the Rambam's[66] position that good/evil (as opposed to truth/falsehood) knowledge was acquired only *after* ingesting the Knowledge fruit. Then what follows is a fascinating probe that describes a heavenly court chamber deliberation behind closed doors. As such it blazes three interpretive trails leading man out of Utopia. First, after eating from the Knowledge Tree, the Almighty mockingly feigned major concern that mankind may next eat from the Life Tree and reach heavenly parity in both knowledge and longevity. This tongue-in-cheek sentiment captured the absurdity and farce of man's true insignificance. Of course, there was no mortal threat of clay-footed man challenging heaven's rule. 'They were expelled from Eden's Garden.' Working the earth at their ex-Eden origin better reflected their true station.

66. *Moreh Nevuchim* I:2

A second explanation of the verses reads with a tone of disdain. Heavenly beings ask rhetorically: Is this what Adam's creation in our image and likeness amounts to? "*MAN MANAGES TO KNOW GOOD AND EVIL*" is a profoundly uninspiring headline for his accomplishments. The lackluster couple, then, has no business in the Garden. If they could not control themselves and refrain from eating forbidden fruit, let us see to it that they do not also enjoy the permissible Life Tree fruit.

A final approach takes a very different, positive tack. The verses can be understood as testimony to man's resilience and catharsis. Hashem desired the couple to repent and abandon the folly of their mistaken choices, pursuing the original lofty goals ascribed to them. Adam's forced expulsion from pastoral, rosy Eden into a new world of drudgery might be the very impetus needed to bring change. Tough love, so to speak, was embodied and symbolically called the Life Tree. Toiling in backbreaking work, Adam and Chavah could reinvent themselves more along the lines that the Almighty had charted. Exile represented an opportunity to regain eternity. A new residence and workplace "East of Eden" would present an excellent venue to get down to the business of Divine introspection – specifically and potently combined with rigorous physical labor.

In sum, there are opposing views in understanding the terse passage. Together they provide snapshots of post-sin man from a heavenly lens. The range spans a description of man in ways associated with mockery and indignation to a depiction in a positive light as fully able of achieving catharsis.

Another approach (contra Rambam) is that Adam was *created* with the clarity of knowledge approximating that of celestial intelligent beings. His perspicacity honed a finely sensitized judgment of *everything* under the headings of good/bad – right/wrong, truth/lie, and beautiful/hideous – in both theoretical and practical realms. Adam was wired to grasp reality in its deepest sense and limit. One thing eluded his knowledge and that was in the arena of sensory experience. Adam had not, so to speak, touched fire to know, through pain, that it burned. In that pristine way, Adam before eating the fig resembled the heavenly facilitators. The Torah teaches that pre-sin Adam was like the celestial rovers because he shared, per se, the way they acquired knowledge and viewed the world. It was cerebral in an "otherworldly" way. Adam could make good/evil distinctions perfectly.

Adam underwent fundamental changes the manner by which he gained and processed information after the fall. The knowledge fruit placed mankind on a different plane. From now on, senses would be one of man's teachers, at the expense of his spiritual keenness of mind. But senses tend to take on a life of their own so, for example, the first couple indulged in exaggerated sexual acts that led to sensory intoxication. When Hashem warned man of the dire consequences if he ate the forbidden fruit, it meant a death of accumulating or relating to knowledge in the purest fashion. Death referred to the assimilation of knowledge by way of cruder, sensual, blurrier methods.[67]

Philosophers might ruminate on epistemology, but Divine justice called for punishment. On what grounds did Hashem exile Adam from the Garden? The Garden's fabled Life Tree was fitting nectar only for those who would *live*, see life through the prism of perfect truth. Failed Adam veered from that path. It therefore followed that the Life Tree should be deprived and withheld. Adam got marched out. Eden was wasted on man.

Was this punishment too harsh? Recall that Adam was created outside Eden's walls and implanted there for a specific lofty purpose. Exile ought not to be considered excessive. He was returned from where he came. It seems that man had been ushered out of the Garden pending the verdict. While laboring the land, Adam learned of the heavenly tribunal's decision. Eden's gates shut closed and double-locked against trespass and reentry. For good measure, '[Hashem] placed youths to Eden's east, along with a fiery, swirling sword guarding the Life Tree's path.' Likely, the sword does not actually refer to a paid security agent but rather is meant figuratively to convey blocked access, a firewall. When the couple left Eden and had children it effectively put Eden's ideal far away because childrearing swamped them. In addition to every young couple's thrill and shock of parenthood, Adam and Chavah had to contend with poisonous potent doses of rancorous sibling rivalry. As the reader will soon see, Kayin and Hevel's animosity turned treacherous, murderous. These challenges (and the smaller, mundane ones) made Eden even more remote. Traumatized by their children's infighting daggers, man and woman never so much as peeked back. Eden was a thing past, an end of an era, albeit a short one.

67. Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 21:5

The Sages[68] taught that the new environment produced maturity in the couple. Specifically Adam and Chavah's renewal came about as a result of one hundred and thirty years of regular fasting, sexual abstention, and other physical self-abnegation. Of course, life did not stop for the first couple but it did radically change – personally and environmentally.

One of the most enigmatic of all Torah stories is thus unraveled. The Torah's illustration of Adam and Chavah's original disorientation and Eden blunder has, of course, layers of meaning and significance even on a rational level. The main lesson can be summed up as follows: Mankind paid and will continue to pay severely for disobeying Divine Law. Machinations, designs of lust and fantasy present major obstacles and distractions toward reaching attainable and beneficial goals set by the Creator. These messages and warnings should be studied regularly since the challenges faced by Adam and Chavah repeat in every generation, in every guise and by every individual.

§§§

As written previously Adam and Chavah's story lends itself to layers of wisdom, beyond the plain understanding. The Sages,[69] for example, traced patterns and made comparisons between Adam in Eden and the corporate Jewish nation and its homeland (see table on next page). Thus it should come as no surprise that the Jewish collective is referred to by the prophet[70] as "Adam."[71]

Putting the finishing touches on this analogy, what happened to Eden's Eldorado? Plausibly, the Garden's magical qualities were transferred to Jerusalem. That would go far in explaining the open miracles associated with the First Temple and the manifest Divine Providence surrounding Jerusalem's eternal hills and mountains. The proximity of Eden and Jerusalem is consistent with the Sages[72] who taught that Adam and Chavah are buried in nearby Chevron's *Me'arat HaMachpelah*. The patriarchs, we will see later, obviously believed in that tradition and dedicated themselves to sharing the hallowed burial cave with Hashem's very first couple.[73]

68. Attributed to *Bereshit Rabbah*. Cf. BT *Eruvin* 18b
69. *Bereshit Rabbah* 19:9
70. *Yechezkel* 34:31
71. BT *Yevamot* 61a
72. BT *Eruvin* 53a
73. See chapter five, first *aliyah*

ADAM	THE JEWISH NATION
Formed from dust and imbued with soul	Raised from humble Egyptian origins to receive the Torah
Placed into the Garden of Eden	Brought into the Holy Land
Garden filled with edible delights	Land blessed with succulent agriculture
A Tree of eternal life and a Tree of forbidden pursuits	The *mikdash* Torah and prophecy, coupled with Canaanite idolatry
A river emerged from Eden to irrigate the Garden	A river of Providential blessings were bestowed on *Eretz Yisrael*
Beyond the Garden, the fountainhead split four ways throughout the world	The abundance of blessing on Israel brought forth Divine justice when called for – the four empires which came upon her to conquer and destroy
Adam was commanded to toil and guard the Garden	The Nation was to preserve the Land by keeping positive and negative precepts
Adam's diet lacked nothing except the Knowledge fruit	The Jews were encouraged to partake of Israel's bounty, but refrain from idolatry
Chavah tripped and undermined her spouse	Jewish women enticed their husbands to worship false gods during the First Temple period[74]
Snake seduced man	Canaanites caused idolatry
The first couple heard Hashem's voice and were rebuked for dodging responsibility	The prophets' chastisement was met with indignant denial
Hated snake slithers and eats dust	Hated accursed Canaanites ignominiously ejected from *Eretz Yisrael*
Chavah saddled with stress	Jewish women suffer and fret in exile
Adam cursed with thorny produce	Israel desolate
Adam returned to original habitat	Exiled Jews sent back to Egypt[75]
Adam expelled from Eden	*Bnei* Yisrael sent out of their Land
Hope expressed that man return to ennobled Tree of Life existence	The *Shechinah* will yet dwell in the midst of a redeemed Nation

Beyond the allusion to Jewish history, insightful observations about the human condition emerge from a general perspective of the Garden drama. Eden's setting provided man with an environment varied, vibrant, and enthralling in

74. *Yirmiyahu* 7:18; 44:15–16; *Melachim* I 11:4
75. *Devarim* 28:68

a way that parallels the planet's endless variety and boundless potential. The Garden's centrality mirrors earth's placement in a larger universe. Adam's life (albeit short) in Eden presupposes or teaches the dominant role that humans exert over their environment. People are pregnant with power and creative potential, fully capable of wielding near total mastery.

Hashem laced rich vegetation within the Garden to magnanimously provide for man's every desire just as the world teems with beneficial and wonderfully lush nourishment. Is Planet Earth not a moveable feast? Man does not live on bread alone. Eden's forest grew the Life and Knowledge Trees. The fruits of these trees give meaning, depth, and spiritual dimension; they are soul foods (though, as mentioned above, the Knowledge fruit was not intended to be ingested, reflecting the recommended moderation in utilizing its potency). The Life Tree was meant to enable personal growth and satisfying piety, providing people with the perspective and breadth to scale the heavens, touch eternity. Moreover, the Life and Knowledge Trees' respective central and peripheral placement in the Garden strongly suggested that their fruit were paramount to all others. If the Life Tree represented truth, beauty, and ultimate value, then the Knowledge Tree symbolized all of the pragmatic potential that societal conventions provide. The Rambam[76] pointed out that both of these *trees* bespoke heavenly *counsel* as evidenced by the Hebrew words' shared root letters (*etz* and *etzah* respectively). The Knowledge of good and evil Tree's effectiveness was contingent upon proper and measured usage. That is, in reasonable doses its fruity smell and touch were beneficial. Overindulgence subverted its positive qualities, rendering them toxic.

The description of Garden flora is followed by mention of the four rivers that fork out and water the earth's four corners. Water carries rich symbolism. Possibly, the four rivers represent the four elements referred to in ancient philosophy: fire, air, water, and earth. Or perhaps the four rivers correspond to four categories: inanimate, plant, animal and man. Upon deeper inspection, each river's proper name (*Pishon*, *Gichon*, *Chidekel*, and *Prat*) parallels one of these four elements.

Stocked with celestial food and beverage, Eden awaited man. Adam was created outside of the Garden's confines and brought in for the specific purposes of tending and guarding that magical spot. Hashem fully intended Adam

76. *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:22

to develop his spiritual side in an environment outfitted for personal growth and higher differentiation. Divine command gave Adam clear direction and instruction. When Hashem spoke in terms of the Garden rules and diet, a lifestyle regime totally compatible with man's essence was laid down on the table: Eat this; don't eat that. It amounted to a mission statement. Adam learned that the world is a wonderful place and meant to be enjoyed. Practically no sensible pleasure would be denied. But on the other hand it also implied that no abuse, overindulgence, or perversion would be tolerated. Of all of the countless forest trees, bushes, rivers, and streams, the test boiled down to one single, solitary tree. Could Adam and Chavah refrain from eating Knowledge fruit? Casual contact with the fruit was indispensable; eating of it disastrous. Knowledge fruit had potency enough to kill man's soul as it was an anathema to higher calling. The Knowledge fruit enzymes flowing through man's faculties rendered the Life Tree fruit irrelevant, undesirable, and scorned. It led man astray, asunder.

The human interest side of the Eden story turned complex after setting the idyllic stage. Chavah had been created from Adam's rib bone. This second account of the creation of man in as many of this *parashah*'s Biblical chapters teaches about human makeup and complexion. Better yet, it paints man in his many shades and hues. Specifically, Adam's "feminine" side is that part of his psyche that craves social conventions; Chavah grounds man. Man without woman wanders aimlessly, anchorless. It leads to governmental paralysis and religious stagnation. Chavah's creation was for more than procreation. Her partnership greased societal and spiritual wheels.

Adam's existence before Chavah's creation had been trial and error in the sense that Hashem marched the animal world in front of Adam. Would man find suitable company among the forest inhabitants? Was man's creation a jungle storybook? Adam determined after much analysis that his existential helpmate would not come from primates or for that matter, any other animal or bird. At that point, the Maker caused Adam to fall into a deep slumber. Symbolically, sleep represented the early developmental years of maturation. Analytical reasoning had yet to be trained and exercised. Young Adam's teenage hormones, so to speak, numbed his more rational and thinking skills. While in this maturation stage, Hashem removed a rib bone from Adam. The removal alludes to Adam's young adult semen that is capable of reproducing other people upon whom society can be built. Man acknowledged this new

ability when he said upon meeting and seeing Chavah that she is a most close and compatible companion.

Intuitively, Adam knew that he can leave his parents, spending the rest of his life cleaving to his partner. The spousal attachment bond is the basis for mankind feeling so deeply about the family unit or by extension, people of the same village, town, city, state or nation. But there is an inherent danger in Adam's abandoning of his mother and father and rushing headlong into his wife's arms. Namely, an overly social identifying tendency could, under certain circumstances, derail a person from Hashem (father figure) and Torah (mother figure). In other words, peer pressure can corrosively undermine piety. The need to "fit in" or "go along" in less morally attuned individuals lends itself to a herd mentality that shuns traditional right and wrong. Social man's psyche treads a fine precipice between belonging and alienation, walking before the Creator or abandoning Hashem's ways.

If man's dilemma presented great challenges, Hashem's provision of the Knowledge Tree gave ample antidote. Had man been created as an asocial being, then there would be no need for the Knowledge fruit. Asocial man would not feel the compulsion to cleave to his wife, or for that matter, any other human being. The Knowledge fruit is exactly the prescribed formula for blending heaven and earth. The smell and touch of the magical fruit gave definition, meaning and parameter to a noble life and calling. When the Torah says that Adam and Chavah felt no embarrassment despite their lack of clothing, a basic societal observation was made. Precisely, subjective societal norms define and inculcate right and wrong, acceptable clothing mores and too scant body covering. But what is the correct balance for achieving modesty? The Knowledge fruit scent and touch provide for harmonious social equity and laid down sensible guidelines.

The original plan called for man and woman in balmy Eden. That is when the snake appeared, shamefully exposing Adam's underbelly. Man cowered from the heights in his unabashed pursuit of here and now. The snake represented Adam's fancies and fantasies. They got the better of him, dashing his grand plans of religious contemplation and behavior. When the Torah described the snake as the cleverest animal, it alluded to man's potential for practically unlimited fantasy. Nothing can compete with man unhinged, unleashed, and undone. The Sages[77] observed that the primordial snake was likened to

77. *Bereshit Rabbah* 19:1

a devil riding on a camel because of the immense power of man's potential imagination in pursuit of pleasure. In the recesses of man's mind wind dark, demented alleyways. Eroticism and perceived fulfillment of sexual exploitation has retarded civilization and progress from time immemorial. Furthermore, the Sages[78] attribute Kayin's conception and birth to the first couple's fantasia during sexual intimacy. Fratricide took Hevel's life when misplaced attitudes towards healthy and normal sexual intercourse set the scene.

The Creator's message to Adam could not have been any clearer. Man's endless cravings and lusts might trigger the snake's urgent murmurings: Hashem wants you to derive no pleasure in this world. His spiritual side knows better. Man was shown an entire world of beauty, enjoyment, harmony and meaning. Besides the ingestion of the Knowledge fruit, man had free rein in the Garden. It was not to be an existence of abject abstinence or refrain. The Maker contemplated a place of practically unlimited enjoyment and satisfaction. So long as it is a means to scaling spiritual heights, not an independent purpose. Sinking into materialism's morass leads to nothing but a dead end. Literally. Severance from the Life Tree spells man's demise.

Fantasy does not surrender that easily. Death? A contemplative existence with atrophied sensory capacity – *that* is death! Naïve intellectualism sans exquisitely developed hands-on pragmatism – *that* is death! *Eat*! And know, *live*, life!

Health. Growth. Emotional satisfaction. Practical skills. *Life, life, life, life*... Adam allowed Chavah's distractions (read: societal convention) to ruin him. Despite his strengths and resourcefulness, man ignominiously crumbled. Turning away from reason, the two blindly groped and ripped irreparably, as it were, the incipient teachings inherent in the Holy Writ. The couple could always see, but now their eyes chose to fixate on the wrong things. Blinded from truth, they contemplated cheap and contrived values. Man and woman shunned big picture morals and ethics, deciding that little, insignificant "me-now" was all that mattered.

When Adam's first best, trusted and loyal friends – call them: Value, Integrity, Honor and Truth – looked for post-sin Adam, he mocked and ditched them. They did not fit in with his new circle of friends. Coldly, man clothed in flimsy fig leaves rejected their companionship.

78. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 21

Hashem called the arrogant, long-gaited truants to come forward, demanding a reality check. The Garden Life Tree would have supported and encouraged rugged pious individualism, creativity, religious spontaneity. Adam and Chavah turned their backs on all of that as they sunk their teeth into the Knowledge fruit. A spoiled palate and dulled taste buds loathed to look at, let alone taste, the Life fruit. The disgraced couple hid among bushes, incapable of communicating with their Life Source. In a flash, Adam faced his sin's repercussions as he felt acutely alienated from his first, youthful friends with whom he had but briefly enjoyed otherworldly rapture. He winced as his mind's eye caught a glimpse of the mortal wound he had dealt them. Confused, Adam saw Truth and Honor slinking dejectedly away because of his mistaken priorities.

Chavah did not equitably share her husband's burden, since her role was essentially, to assist her husband's spiritual pursuits. This was Adam's failure and his failure exclusively. True, his rib may have misguided him, but Hashem had a bone to pick with man.

To be sure, the Maker's one word call to Adam: '*Ayekah* – Where are you?' struck a deep chord. *How far have you fallen! You live in a cesspool of contrived calculus.* Before stumbling, man had communed meaningfully, if fleetingly, with Hashem, without intimidation. Had not Hashem shared His esteemed values like truth and beauty for man to contemplate and propound? But now among thorny thistles, Adam looked in vain and felt truly naked without his vanished friends. He blushed in shame, cowering ever lower in the briar. Stuttering an excuse, Adam pinned the fault on his lover, Chavah, as if to say that she – bewitching society's agent – elbowed away his first confreres. Not willing to shoulder responsibility, Chavah shifted the snake to the hot-seat as if to say that somehow the serpent cast his irresistible charm spell on her. Blame rested on a muted snake.

When the defendants' machinations were duly exposed, charges against them turned into indictments – indictments which did more than despair of Adam and Chavah. Based on the first couple's initial choices, Hashem's long eye gazed at the direction where civilization would head. Eden's simple, pastoral solitude got chucked. In its place grew concrete jungles; urbanization's skylines sprouted. No question about it. Hashem sighted Adam and Chava's seed who would take the most direct path to scheme, plan, draft and build metropolises. Call it fatal attraction.

Mankind's lowest common denominator (read: ethically challenged) clamored for urbanization, a deafening process that took them ever further away from quaint Eden, and from natural religious spontaneity. Of course, Divine disapproval of Man's decision to abandon the Garden had precious little to do with boisterous noises of congested city boulevards. Just as obvious was that disdain had not been about loathing quantities of refuse slums generate. Finally, censure had not been motivated by abhorrence of poverty, squalor, dehumanization, violence, and corrosion that urbanization effortlessly breed. Though to be sure, such an indictment of Man's seedier side is acknowledged, and justified. But here's the thing. Rejection of heart-felt religious contemplation lay at the base of those sketched but still not built edifices that would in time tower stronger and higher with each successive generation of the first Man and Woman.

In the Garden story, the snake "spoke" directly with Chavah and not Adam. That does not imply the complete compartmentalization of mankind's impulse for good and evil. Rather Chavah is part and parcel of Adam's makeup and nature. The serpent appealed to man's imaginative, emotional, and intuitive side while he struck an arrow at man's penchant for social acceptance and belonging. True religious fervor walks fearlessly alone. Graphically, the Sages[79] depicted a metaphor that the snake lay with Chavah, spilling his serpent semen into her whole being. The human condition has been battling this slimy, sordid contagion for eternity. The sole, lasting antidote was a brave, but tiny Jewish national stand and the acceptance of the Torah on Sinai's mountain base.

A heavenly verdict read as a broad spectrum curse afflicting mankind, earth, and snake. It amounted to a chilling condemnation that results when people forsake their true selves in exchange for value systems personified by glitzy and glamorous society. The accursed snake, representing fantasy, slinks lower than any other animal teaching that living for fantasy unhorses reason. Irrational man, then, is less worthy than animal. The snake is cursed to slither on his belly. The abandonment of noble principles and the pursuit of pleasure promote life patterns that live solely for gluttony. Earth's dust serves as the serpent's sustenance. The frenzied dedication to folly is nothing more than dry clod, signifying nothing. Ancient animosity marks man and snake's despised relationship, connoting the thinking part of man's abhorrence of the lazy part that refuses reason. Torah commandments' design centers on

79. BT *Shabbat* 146a

pushing back unbridled fancy and fantasy to man's dark crags. Adam is told to uncompromisingly crush the snake's head in a way that Torah takes aim and stamps on death vanity's allure. Yet, as man approaches his life's end, the snake strikes at this exposed heel. Fantasies fill his head. Even prophets lost their communication ability with the Almighty as death came near. The snake's strident hissing within them drowned out, to some degree, Hashem's word.

Chavah's accursed challenge is an acknowledgement that her thinly-developed basis for reason makes her easy prey for shiny societal attractions. A headlong passion for neon, so to speak, exacerbates her existential anxiety. An overpowering maternal instinct will sap much of her energies throughout her childbearing and childrearing years. Furthermore, her preoccupation with domestic responsibilities will leave precious little time for pursuing her keen sense and love of aesthetics.

Similarly, Adam's cursed pronouncement exposed his skewed sense of priorities. Siding with Chavah, Adam turned his back on himself. Lowering his guard, man also lowered his sights that had been briefly channeled on eternal pathways. Balanced man had a Garden at his fingertips. But when he tripped, Adam found an uncooperative soil to till. Exile's craggy stone earth gave niggardly; pints of sweat and tears produced a pittance. His halcyon Garden days were gone. The play for passion that Adam hoped to achieve bit back hard, and before he knew it, weed, thorn, and thistle caged him. Rambam[80] likened these weeds to mindless philosophies, theorizing and postulating emptiness that a blind man supposes to be truth. Finally, fawning man's coarse diet will work him a lifetime until it is time to sleep forever in earth's bowels from where his body skeleton was scooped.

Disparagingly, Adam called his partner "Chavah" because it alluded to her incessant jabbering and propensity for plain, insipid tastes that lack lift and spirit. Her motherly curiosity indiscriminately extended to all living things. Soon after the heavenly tribunal passed judgment and sent the couple away from Eden, they were dressed in animal fur skins. Replacing leaves with leather reflected their fresh reality – societal trends, not pious ponderings, engender apparel fashion fads.

Though it was not a plea-bargain motion, the heavenly tribunal showed compassion and agreed to let man and woman keep what they had illegally

80. *Moreh Nevuchim* I:2

gained. That is, Hashem allowed them to maintain their sense of societal pull while not demoting or eradicating mankind's eternal soul. A broad human type of inoculation occurred when Adam's first food was, figuratively speaking, Life Tree fruit – read: dominance of the intellect. Later, when they nibbled on the Knowledge Tree fruit's second course, their internal body structures had already been, in a mystical sense, fortified. That pattern reversed itself in the couple's offspring. Human beings are perceived to be born and nursed on the Knowledge Tree byproduct-milk that presents babies with inbuilt spiritual handicaps. Those few that grow up and seek Life Tree diets emerge from those innate challenges and attain the highest levels of Hashem-awareness.

To summarize, man's curt brush with eternal Eden values (Life Tree fruit) galvanized his spirit. However Adam's offspring, stripped of that initial pivotal Life Tree force, could only achieve it at a later stage of development provided they proactively sought out Eden's Life Tree on earth. A Divine promise had been extended. If man truly toiled and bucked his first blush infatuations, he was promised 'that he could become like an eternal one.' In this mindset, man's *body* derived nourishment and protection from the Knowledge Tree fruit (societal structure), but the *soul* developed and soared if its palate graduated to Life Tree fruit (fearless self-reliance).

The couple's new ex-Eden environment need not be painted as sinister. True, life out of the Garden is not quite life inside the Garden. However, Adam's brief Eden fling endowed him well and gave him ample tools to meet future challenges and crises. The Eden lockout, then, is understood as a mission. Man and woman are both fully capable of surviving, thriving in an unsheltered cocoon, assuming they really put their minds to it. The Knowledge Tree provided navigation skills for a sweat-soaked existence. Angelic cherubs and fiery swords represent spiritual inspiration and the innate longing for a life well-spent in seeking Divine companionship. Compounding the tribulations of eking out a livelihood, spiritual aims can get readily dismissed. How is a fatigued individual to set it all right especially when the Life Tree stands remotely across the chasms and galaxies of man's psyche? Yet the Tree radiates, beckoning human souls to triumph despite it all. The Life Tree's light is the reason for being.

The Torah began with descriptions of the world and Adam's creation. The retelling of man and woman's foundations relayed much more. It threw down a promise and a gauntlet. The main task is to struggle for the sake of

protecting and nourishing the noble human soul. Inherently craving "here and now," man seeks social approval via compromising transcendentalism. Dashes of dawn draw him to eternal light. For Jews, cleaving to a Torah way of life is the pursuit of the Life Tree. Its verdant, sprawling branches of commandments are the only way to steer a course through so many contrived societal pressures and challenges. The nature of man is, at root, misguided and mischievous.[81] The Sages[82] point out that Adam and Chavah's clothing represents Torah values' warmth and protection against widespread foreign lies and notions. In sum, Eden's narrative serves as a perfect preface to the Torah's timeless requisites.

§§§

The first post-Eden intrigue introduces Adam and Chavah's children. The reader is again confronted with confounding elements, forcing him to address whether these passages are fact or fiction. Five factors indicate toward the latter:

- Shet's birth is recorded twice.
- The verses take the family tree and fork out along the lines of Adam and Chavah's two surviving sons, Kayin and Shet (Hevel had been murdered), creating two parallel human chains. A closer look at the two family branches leaves the first line in near anonymity, omitting the important chronological details given regarding Shet's descendants.
- The reference to Adam changes. At times he is called Adam, yet at other times he is referred to as '*the* Adam' with a definite article.
- In *Divrei HaYamim*, the author Ezra provided Adam and Chavah's successive generations and completely omitted Kayin, Hevel, and their offspring as if they were never born.[83]
- A Midrashic[84] account of Chavah conceiving (and seemingly delivering) quintuplets (Kayin, Hevel, and three sisters) on Day Six of creation lends credence to the suggestion that this family is fictional.

In summary, technical grammatical points seen together with apparently larger textual discrepancies boggles the student's mind. What, if anything, is

81. Cf. Chapter two, fourth *aliyah*.
82. *Bereshit Rabbah* 20:12
83. See *Divrei HaYamim* I 1:1
84. *Bereshit Rabbah* 22:2

real and what if anything is feigned metaphor about this familial high dramatic turn of events?

Clearly, in keeping with the general approach presented earlier in respect to the Eden epoch, the first several generations of human history must be viewed through lenses of plain reading as well as metaphor in order to better appreciate the significance. The five points above are not insurmountable:

- The Torah often employs a style whereby a particular narrative is broached superficially. Later, the Torah will return to that same subject applying far greater detail and scrutiny. This is the pattern when dealing with the creation of Adam. It follows also with Kayin, Hevel, Noach, Yitzchak, and Yaakov's descendants in Egypt.
- The human chain beginning with Adam and Chavah finds continuity with their third son Shet. Kayin and Hevel are not fictitious. Rather, the Torah purposely writes topically about them because their lives amounted to *nada*. As the first murder victim, Hevel did not live long enough to accomplish very much. Murderer Kayin may have achieved longevity, but his story is not worth the trouble as he was much marred and marked. The same modus operandi exists with Yitzchak and Esav. Namely, the reader knows the intricate details about Yitzchak's life such as what age he married, had children, and died. Yet with Esav, none of those facts are explicit. This is an important fundamental to utilize when learning Torah. Generally speaking, the Torah delves into the lives of the righteous. By contrast, chronicles of the corrupt are curtailed.
- In *Bereshit*'s earlier chapters, the Torah attaches a definite article to Adam's name ("the Adam"). This unusual grammatical usage intimates that Adam, in addition to being a proper name of original man, was *sui generis* of his species. After Adam and Chavah had children, the Torah dropped the definite article since "Adam" was now only his proper name.
- Author Ezra omitted many people and events in *Divrei HaYamim* due to a lack of posterity's interest in the escapades of the evil. *Tanach* history does not aim at merely relaying sequential and reliable facts. Dry desiderata can be derived from secular sources.

- The Sages observed that Chavah conceived her first two sons (with triplet daughters) while yet in the Garden. The message suggested is that those children were a result of the Knowledge fruit and as such it grotesquely influenced their nature. As a biological aside and interesting tidbit, Adam and Chavah were likely created as full-bodied twenty year olds. Fit and prime, Chavah could have physically handled a first multiple birth pregnancy. Part of the Divine plan desired to see a world populated quickly which would also explain Chavah's quintuplets. Besides, Adam being fashioned from earth and Chavah from a rib bone did not, obviously, follow normal reproductive channels. It should not be surprising that a multiple begetting occurred in the beginning. However, even if Kayin and Hevel (and their sisters) were conceived in Eden, they certainly were not born and bred there.

The plain storyline of the first family aside, the nitty-gritty of human development deserves closer investigation and interpretation. It can be assumed that immediately after Adam and Chavah tasted the Knowledge fruit, they copulated. Thus conception and pregnancy occurred in Eden. Sin aside, having large families was consistent with Hashem's overall plan. It is most probable that virile Adam fertilized several eggs and thus Kayin and Hevel married sisters. As mentioned earlier, at this incipient stage of history only father/daughter and mother/son incest was taboo. Perhaps the sum total of Adam's sons and daughters referred to later in the *parashah*[85] is six: Kayin, Hevel, Shet and a twin sister for each, somewhat along the lines of the quintuplet births suggested by the Sages.

Kayin and Hevel's respective entries on to the world stage are portrayed by the Torah in terms of Chavah conceiving and/or bearing. Their personalities were influenced by their mother's traits and developed along her lines whereas Shet's qualities were markedly different, as will be later discussed.

Elated Chavah, after delivering Kayin, observed that she had reached parity with her husband. Keenly aware that Adam had considered her his flesh and bone sidekick, now Chavah proclaimed equality. She, together with the Maker, created and she carried her first born son Kayin. Second-born Hevel's birth is described differently than Kayin's in that no mention is made of the

85. Sixth *aliyah* below

parent's sexual intimacy or conception. It likely means that these brothers (and sisters) shared their mother's womb, with Kayin emerging first.

The name Hevel has been incorrectly emended by erring commentators to read "Abel" in order to associate it with the Hebrew word meaning mourning (*avel*). The Hebrew language lends itself to rich imagery even if the first letter (*heh*) is retained and there is no need to meddle and fiddle with sacred Scripture.

The Torah offers sparing little by way of explaining what motivated Kayin and Hevel's sibling rivalry and fratricide. Yet, telling clues can be found. Their choice of livelihood is significant. The verse teaches that Kayin worked in agriculture. Considering the fact that earth was accursed on account of Adam's transgression, Kayin's vocation demonstrated nonchalance, hubris, and irreverence. How could he brush aside the Creator's earthly displeasure so lightly? Cheeky Kayin scorned the warning signs. This leads to a harsh observation about his character. He set goals on materialism and hence his mindset led him aground. The Hebrew translation of his name/essence bespeaks a reckless, blind pursuit of acquisition and conspicuous consumption.

Hevel found employment as a shepherd. If Kayin gravitated towards *plant* growth, Hevel one-upped his brother, dealing in biologically more sophisticated *livestock*. As a man of the pasture, Hevel exhibited some leadership qualities in seeking greener grass. He acquired an artificial sense of animal domination, a taste of control, craving power. The meaning of the name "Hevel" (vanity) implies that the pursuit of political power is vapid.

In sum, both Kayin and Hevel followed their mother's footsteps insofar as they showed a tendency to eschew the big universe picture and grandiose scheme. They were minimalists, beset with spiritual dwarfism. Kayin found existential meaning in farming and all the gadgetry materialism can buy. Hevel attended herds and got his kicks out of ruling others. The reckless pursuit of money and acclaim marked Chavah's two sons, as alluded to by their respective names.

Here is another observation. Shepherd Hevel, like his other family members, was at present prohibited from eating meat. He, therefore, derived profit and success from his flocks' fleece, pelts, milk and other dairy byproducts.

Both sons offered gifts to the Creator. In the story's context, it is probable that neither had more than a cursory religious feeling. A fateful argument that

would end in bloodshed broke out with regard to which profession – agriculture or shepherding – garnered their bosses more prestige.

Kayin's opening salvo highlighted the importance of growing food. Was it not the noble staple that sustained human and animal life? He pointed with pride at a great variety of crops, including flax that spun the clothes so basic for creature comfort and dignity. Hevel charged that his occupation outdid his brother's. Besides his disdain for tilling an Almighty-accursed earth, Hevel put forth other arguments. Higher animal life trumped plant life in the bio schema. In addition, dairy products figured high in nutritional categories, and fleece provided warmth. Making allusion to the Creator as Shepherd, presaging that so many Jewish greats initially meditated while pasturing flocks (Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, David), Hevel power-presented his bullet points.

At loggerheads to determine a winner, both boys agreed to have the Almighty arbitrate. Sacrifices were proffered in the hope of reaching a verdict and victor. The Torah teaches that the Divine Judge preferred Hevel's animal sacrifice, while snubbing Kayin's. Either the Almighty sent the verdict via a thunderbolt that gobbled up the animal strapped to the altar (reminiscent of similar Divine gestures described in *Tanach*[86]) or perhaps victory descended in the form of Divine bounty. Hevel's herd multiplied exponentially whereas Kayin's crops crashed.

What did the Creator see in Hevel's offering that warranted acceptance? Plausibly, Hashem acknowledged the first shepherd's idealism of spirit lacking in the first farmer. Pasturing flocks falls in the heady category. Further, it lends itself to mindful, intellectual moments. Leading a pack entails personal safeguards to honorable governance. Hevel, had he not been killed, tended toward a vocation fit for a dignified public life of dedication, a captain among fighting corps.

Kayin's was a different story altogether. His choice to flout the Divine curse highlighted a wicked streak. His creativity would focus on artificial tinkering to end the run of stubborn sod conditions. Rather than exert influence over nature, Kayin contented himself to be enslaved by the earth's fruits. Kayin's sight never lifted beyond the topsoil; his was a low life. At a base level, this mindset paves the way for the unscrupulous to lie, thieve, and steal.

86. E.g. *Vayikra* 9:24; *Melachim* I 8:10. See also chapter two, fourth *aliyah*

Hashem, by accepting Hevel's gift was essentially making a value statement about both boys' career choices and motivations. Kayin did not take the loss well. He moped dispairingly as melancholy grabbed and held tight. He rankled to think that the natural birth order had come undone and that as a result son number two sailed past him. Hashem rebuked Kayin for grossly exaggerating the competition's meaning and outcome. Encouraging the elder brother to pick himself up, Hashem essentially informed jilted Kayin that his top brother status could readily be regained. It would entail making a new plan and acting accordingly. Kayin should have surmised from the implication that Hevel's vocation, while superior to the agriculturist, still lacked the highest aims of piety and contemplation. Government, part of civil society, bows to peer-pressure and wallows in the lowest common denominators that stunt spirituality. Hashem followed up His encouragement with a stern warning to Kayin. Namely, failure to comply with major lifestyle changes would land him not just inferior to Hevel but headed for a life confined to perpetual sin. Stilted farmer Kayin would find himself stuck to base values, hoisted by his own petard. Free choice could not have been better presented to tottering Kayin.

But Kayin ignored all Divine pleas and insight. He sized up his options and charted his own course of action. Seeking hegemony, he framed a dogma based upon strict primogeniture. Older brothers rule and dominate younger ones. Hevel, to Kayin's doctrine, stood in his way. How long would this last – would Hevel's progeny dominate Kayin's forever? That, Kayin plotted, cannot be tolerated, and he began rolling out plans for fratricide. Unwilling to share the world, Kayin executed his brother. Broadly missing the point of Hashem's words, Kayin thought that he could retain his present wayward behavior, kill his brother, and force Hashem into backing him as the sole survivor of his parents.

Some classic Jewish thinkers[87] have asserted that Jerusalem was at the heart of the two brothers' contention and competition. Both put their lives on the line in order to gain the undisputed champion and guardian status of the holiest of all holy cities. Other commentators[88] stressed that Kayin, in killing his kin, dismissed one of wisdom's greatest pearls. Kayin had labored under the false impression that his younger brother's sacrifice spoiled his perfectly good relationship with the Maker. He thought haughty Hevel had

87. See *Kuzari* 2:12
88. *Rabbeinu Nissim*

no initiative – he just stole Kayin's idea and repackaged it in firstborn flocks' glamour to show him up. Somehow, Kayin flubbed, Hashem delighted in human competition replete with winners and losers. This fallacious perversion was dismissed by the Almighty. Kayin should have but did not ascertain that Hashem examines each and every individual and desires his level best efforts. The Creator spelled out that Kayin's sacrifice fell short because of his own foolish thoughts and deeds. His preposterous conspiracy theory did not play any role in his personal debacle.

As if obsessed, Kayin lured Hevel to a distant lair, far from their parents' protection. To further assuage any doubts about his older brother's invitation for a friendly walk in the field, Kayin informed Hevel about Hashem's pep talk. The big brother spoke as if sibling rivalry was a thing of the past. But there, alone in an isolated dell, Kayin carried out the crime. Mercilessly, Kayin slew his own flesh and blood twin kid brother.

Hashem called to the murderer and began the interrogation. 'Kayin, where is your brother?' Echoing his father's seeming denial of the Omniscient, not even attempting an alibi, the killer responded indifferently. 'How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?' Hashem retorted with a rhetorical question: 'What did you do? Your brother's spilt blood cries heavenward from the earth.' Hashem let Kayin know that the grave did not conceal nor stifle the blood's stain. The Sages[89] aptly labeled it the single murder that killed what should have become half a world's population.

Sentencing Kayin began with a pronouncement that effectively barred him from his farming vocation because Hashem would see to it that he would experience crop failure season after frustrating season. Since the earth conspired, so to speak, by taking in Hevel's mutilated body, it too would be delivered reeling recompense. The blood-soaked soil would poison anything buried in its crevices.

Kayin's crime called for eternal wandering which effectively meant a perpetual futile search for fertile farmland. As in times of blight and famine, a nomad persists and longs for a place to grow meager sustenance, so too with Kayin. In vain, he was destined to stay in one place long enough to know that nothing panned out for him. His treacherous deed turned a vibrant human

89. *Bereshit Rabbah* 22:9

life into a stony corpse. Similarly, those same killer hands sapped life out of each seed sowed.

Bloodstained Kayin grasped the full brunt of what he had done. Despondent, he confessed 'my sin is too grievous and heinous to bear.' The ramifications and magnitude brought recognition that this atrocity called for the maximum punishment – the death penalty. He thought himself deserving of a cut-off from Divine Providence. Kayin keenly felt a sense of non-belonging as if suspended, marooned. Because an unspeakable crime hit so low, he reasoned sacrifice and atonement unattainable; he did not deserve a way out. Kayin's act set him squarely in limbo. A tormented soul reached the end of a proverbial bridge leading nowhere. Truly contrite, Kayin's prayer hoped a murderer or animal of prey would end his misery and quiet the demons that brought him to the outer brink.

The possibility that he would live in the shadow of imminent death became overwhelming. Each peripatetic step seemed like treading on a loaded minefield. Each pause from movement tingled. He felt as if he was caught in the crosshairs of an ever-vigilant sniper's sight. Kayin was haunted to his very core.

And then he broke down.

Hashem threw a repentant killer relief. 'Whoever kills Kayin…!' The edict warned that anyone who killed Kayin would be held accountable. There was no death warrant or bounty on the first murderer's head. A second Divine statement underwrote a seven-generation stay of execution. Revenge would visit anyone who broke Hashem's pledge to Kayin. This injunction expired in the eighth generation.

Why did Hashem award Kayin clemency to the seventh generation? The Creator desired a developed and populated planet. The temporary suspension of the death sentence allowed and fostered that aim. Seen that way, Kayin's delayed punishment was incidental to him. He was simply used for accomplishing Divine purposes.

Another angle also presents itself. That is, as written above, Kayin's personal anguish tormented his core being. Death would spare him of the hurt. Hashem wanted to delay Kayin's death because each passing day frustrated his hope to die quickly. This approach emphasizes that Kayin's protracted life was a fitting and appropriate punishment. The mark of Kayin served notice that

this flagged man was granted safe passage. Hashem's statement then reads: 'Anyone who kills Kayin will be subject to seven-fold revenge.' Harming Kayin carried dire consequences because it interfered with Divine will.

Kayin's "mark" kept wild animals at bay – they were stricken with terror at the sight of him. The Sages[90] suggested that Hevel's dog attached himself to Kayin, watching over him.

In comparing Adam and Kayin's punishment, it appears that Kayin's was more severe. After the exile from Eden, Adam stayed put in one place and there enjoyed a modicum of inner peace, security and tranquility. Kayin, on the other hand, was perpetually on the move and had Divine Providence completely stripped from him. He was left on his own to journey, isolated and alone.

'Kayin wandered in the land of Nod.' Possibly Nod referred to India. Or perhaps Kayin travelled the globe, but was not allowed to set foot in Israel where his parents dwelled. Precisely how Kayin met his death is uncertain. If we presume that Hashem proclaimed retribution for Kayin's killer, then there is no particular indication that Kayin met his death after seven generations. According to some Sages,[91] he and his extended family met their demise in the Great Flood. Following our first understanding of Hashem's statement, it is almost certain that seventh-generation Lemech killed Kayin: Adam, Kayin, Chanoch, Erad, Mechuyael, Metushael, and Lemech. One might also start this count from Kayin and end it with Lemech's offspring. In other words, once Lemech had children, the seven-generation stay expired.

'Kayin had sexual relations with his wife who conceived and gave birth to Chanoch.' Kayin had been chased away from his family, told to wander until further notice (read forever). Lonesome, he craved social interaction and desperately wanted sons to alleviate a forlorn existence. The same verse tells that 'he was a city builder.' A career change (urban planning in lieu of agriculture) was expedient because of his string of farming failures. Tactfully, he was mindful of the Divine decree which called for his perpetual itinerant status. That is why a close grammatical reading of the description of builder Kayin's project intimates that he built the town in stages, whenever he returned to it from his ambling, aimless roving. Thus he never retained, so to speak,

90. *Bereshit Rabbah* 22:12
91. *Shmot Rabbah* 31:17

permanent residency. That also explains his calling the town "Chanoch" after his son. Kayin knew that he could never consider a city his very own since by Divine decree he was a hobo.

The Torah's treatment of Kayin's descendants is cursory. Nothing is known or recorded about them because they were obliterated in the Great Flood. Their chain is significant only inasmuch as it traces seventh generation Lemech (Kayin's likely murderer).

Fifth *aliyah*

'Lemech married two women.
The first one was Adah and the second Tzilah.'

The sex-fixated and fiendish Lemech broke with tradition. Boasting boyish exploits, he craved two wives because one could not satisfy his libido. This self-styled lady's man was ultimately snubbed by his spouses but not before they bore him children. The two wives named their respective children, in a manner, after Hevel and Kayin in the hope that they would follow their examples. 'Adah bore Yaval who was the patriarch to tent-dwellers and cattlemen.' Strictly speaking the Torah is not asserting that Yaval – as opposed to Hevel – began the shepherding profession. Rather, the verse emphasizes that Yaval improved upon his ancestor's primitive and outmoded animal husbandry techniques, providing livestock with shelter. Alternatively, perhaps Yaval mastered animal genetic engineering and breeding, setting apart different strains after developing them.

Yaval's brother 'was named Yuval.' He was credited with inventing various musical instruments. Music complements shepherding and contributes to its enjoyment and enhancement. Yuval's merrymaking and foot-stompin' entertainment gained him popularity and widespread renown. These leadership and political qualities are reminiscent of Hevel, his namesake.

Lemech's second wife 'Tzilah bore Tuval Kayin.' He mined metals and proved adept and handy at finding uses for the new material. His aggressive and combative traits lent themselves to a passion for military strategy and arms development. Following Kayin's destructive streak, Tuval Kayin mastered his trade. He manufactured metal swords and spears in order to better strike fear in the hearts of his adversaries. 'Tuval Kayin's sister was Naamah.' In Hebrew her name reflects a woman both sweet and pleasant. Likely, Naamah

earned her name as a talented vocalist in her half-brother's band. Perhaps, that name intended to convey that her beauty lay with her impressive poetic and literary abilities. The Sages[92] suggested that Naamah married Noach. A mellifluous name mirrored her lovely manners. If Naamah was Noach's wife, it should be assumed that they did not have children together and she died before the flood. This conclusion is compelling since the Divine scheme called for humanity to descend exclusively from Adam's third son Shet. Hevel and Kayin's seed did not survive it. This premise has Scriptural basis. Lemech's children's names Yaval, Yuval, and Tuval Kayin share the letters "*val*" which in Hebrew denotes obliteration.

Lemech's words to his two wives 'listen wives of Lemech' are cryptic. Tradition[93] helps make meaning of the verse. Apparently, Lemech lost his eyesight. That did not deter him from hunting either for sport in nobleman fashion, or for skins. However, it did necessitate Lemech taking a guide while hunting. This caddy would track down targets for Lemech and signal him to shoot an arrow.

One fateful day the lad saw what appeared to be game in the bush, and lined up Lemech to fire. Bulls-eye. Pierced, Kayin let out a mighty whelp. He succumbed to his wounds, mistaken for a wild, hairy mammoth. Mortified and shocked, Lemech and the guide ran to their target. They shuddered to think that, though inadvertently, Lemech had killed his grandfather's grandfather. In fury, Lemech fatally crushed the tracker's skull with his bow for misleading his aim and having him kill what supposedly was big game.

As a result of the double tragedy, both of Lemech's wives separated from him. They would not consort with a cold-blooded murderer. Lemech sweet-talked them back home by saying, among other things, that the fault lay with him and none with them. As for killing the hunting guide, that too was his own loss and not theirs. Summing up his sorrows, Lemech cajoled them not to leave and make matters worse. Besides, he asserted 'Kayin's act was to be avenged in the seventh generation.' Following the alternative reading of Hashem's statement presented above, Lemech's tradition was that on account of murdering Kayin, he would pay bitterly. But he would not be alone in facing

92. *Bereshit Rabbah* 23:3
93. *Tanchuma Bereshit* 11

Divine wrath. A grisly forewarning had been issued. Lemech's seed – endless seas of sevens thereof – would all be wiped out in the Great Flood.

After a superficial treatment of humanity's dead-end players, the *parashah* backtracks and retraces Adam and Chavah's story. Matured, contrite, focused, and realigned, a marital and religious reconciliation occurred. 'And Adam (resumed) intimacy with Chavah.' It is very peculiar that the Torah needed to tell about Adam and Chavah's intimacy since it is abundantly obvious that couples please each other as a normal part of a loving and deep relationship.

The point was noted by the Sages[94] who explained the verse's significance. Adam, it seems, sexually separated from Chavah after the couple left Eden. Years of introspection and devotion to Hashem brought Adam to a place of religious and intellectual greatness. Adam, as a manner of speech, arrived and came of age. He attained high levels of consciousness, differentiation, and transcendence. Seasoned, Adam reunited with Chavah, confident that the couple could, this time around, start again and get it right. Man had gained tools that would allow him to build a relationship and family structure that Hashem had originally intended for mankind.

There was a practical side to the couple's reconciliation. Adam had learned that Kayin murdered Hevel. Furthermore, Adam effectively lost Kayin because Kayin's exile precluded contact with his parents in the Holy Land. Adam and Chavah deeply wanted a family. Children's company would still their loneliness and profound bereavement. Adam and Chavah had Shet, their third son. It is understood that Shet had a twin sister. As written above, the prohibition against sibling marriages had not yet been decreed. Adam and Chavah drew clear lines for Shet's spousal choice. Under no circumstances should Shet wed a woman from Kayin's lineage. Their intuition matched the Divine plan for Kayin's seed was tainted, destined to meet annihilation during the Great Deluge.

Chavah hoped that Shet would be a replacement, so to speak, for Hevel. He would exemplify a continuation of the goals that she considered paramount, stressing man-contrived values and social validation. Wiser, Adam saw things differently. For him, Hevel's social networking did not cut it. Father was just as adamant that his son would not follow Kayin's materialistic ways. Shet,

94. *Bereshit Rabbah* 23:4

in Adam's mind, needed something different than shepherding or farming (or what they represented). Shet's aspirations required cutting a fresh, new chart. It required setting vistas to a higher calling. In a word, Adam inculcated Shet to strive for a life of reasoned presence of mind. Father saw in this son a human line that would cope and thrive in face of the world's distractions, deceptions, and dithering.

'Shet had a son Enosh. A clarion call to Hashem's Name began.' In a sense, a sincere religious revivalism took root in man's mind. Meditation, prayer, and selfless acts inspired and defined man's highest aspirations. This should not be misinterpreted to mean that until Enosh, earlier men like Adam, Hevel and Shet did not know about the Creator. They certainly did. They even sacrificed to the Supreme Being. But Enosh forged something entirely novel. He initiated dialogue. Enosh introduced and fostered a concept of a relationship with the One Above.

Taken as a whole, a deeper layer of this story teaches much about the development of man's religiosity:

- The basis is established for the belief in the creation theory in general and Adam and Chavah as the first people. Exposure to, and details about their lives, foibles, challenges, children, tragedy, catharsis, and ultimate personal renewal lend viable credibility to the narrative. They were flesh and blood. Real people.
- The Torah provides a historical record regarding the genesis of major human endeavors, such as shepherding, music, munitions, and the like.
- The Maker talked, rebuked, encouraged, promised, rewarded, and interacted with man from the very outset.
- Hashem gives mankind clear-cut directives and instructions. Right and wrong have objectivity and definition. Undesirable traits like petty jealousy and anger should be shunned. Kayin killed Hevel on account of them.

Thought and reflection on the world's first chapters yield incalculable wisdom and insights. Indeed, the creation story begs for still deeper understanding. Since Adam and Chavah are the first human beings, the study of their template ranks imperative. They contain seeds and secrets to the psyche's mystique and riddle. At bedrock, Adam and Chavah's experience encapsulate the human condition. Seen in that light, survival's promise is alluded to in Eden's

three tree categories for they encompass a treasure chest gamut that unlocks a planet and beyond.

The ubiquitous 'pleasant to behold and eat' trees represented a natural world as a wonderful and wholesome environment. Basic sustenance, medicine, and enjoyment were put within easy reach for man's usage. The second tree of good and evil knowledge alluded to society's systems, organizations and values. The last Garden tree was the life-giving one. It contained the very best to which man could aspire. Study, reason and analysis played the dominant role. The influence of the Life Tree fruit boosted man to excel and reach lofty potential.

Adam's three sons personified those three trees. Farmer Kayin was top-heavy with pleasant and comely fruit. Shepherd Hevel had been taken in by the Knowledge fruit. Shet gravitated to the Life Tree. His was the line that best understood humanity's mission. Ancient philosophers would similarly categorize class castes. Lowest on the strata ladder are those who resemble and act as animals in that their dreary lives do not budge from the pursuit of satisfying bodily functions and sexual fantasies. The middle tier has slightly more spunk and spark inasmuch as the occupants participate in bureaucracy, leadership, politics and government. The highest rung is reserved for pious thinkers, sages and religious philosophers.

Three trees, three sons, three ideas call to mankind, each wrangling for position and dominance. The human psyche's fertile soil grows triple prototype varieties. On occasion, wrestling can turn roughhouse. Jealous agriculturists and growers turn violent towards city barons and dignitaries. Rioting and death results just as Kayin plotted and murdered Hevel. Hoary Hevellian aristocrats, attempting to maintain law and order, die at Kayin-proletariat hands despite Hashem's clear preference – evidenced by the acceptance of Hevel's sacrifice – for a just society. Shet's leanings garnered the highest marks. Scorning naked materialism, highly suspicious of opulence and fool's gold, Shet's followers focus on what matters the very most. Eternity for Shet is measured not in kickbacks or greenbacks, but in gaining worthwhile knowledge, practicing true values, and refining personality and character. Three sons were born. Only one survived. Shet, alone, made a *mentsch* of himself. A pattern became established and passed down for posterity. Noach and his three sons demonstrated just how stubborn that streak ran.

Sixth *aliyah*

"These are the chronicles of man: On the day that the Almighty created him, He formed him in Hashem's likeness.'

The Torah informs the beloved Jewish People that three outstanding patriarchal strands contributed to the nation's fabric and backbone. The first thread is Adam. His exemplar personal narrative and epic struggle has been described. Noach followed next. His life and times is the subject of the upcoming *parashah*. There readers will learn more about the single man chosen to take up Hashem's cause in a world that had lost its compass. The third strand is Avraham. Beginning at *Parashat Noach*'s conclusion, Jews look to him as a stellar personality among a sea of mindless automatons in the crossroads of a crucial epic.

In an anthropogenic way, these three men represent the following hierarchal systems: plant life, the feeling/emotional realm and the intellectual plane. Adam serves as the Jewish Nation's biological base. Noach can be viewed as supplying the emotional component. Lastly, Avraham established the dimension of speech and mental analysis. Precious human life follows these patterns and is what defines a baby's progression to maturity. Embryologists speak roughly in terms of the first forty days as a time when a fetus receives nourishment and grows form and shape. At around day forty, a human fetus begins developing a nervous system. Feelings and emotions are traceable. The last stage prepares a newborn with a more advanced and sophisticated mental capacity.

Adam evokes an agricultural allusion in ten distinct respects:

- First man was forged from the earth
- Adam's name closely relates to the earth (Adam-adamah)
- Chavah was fashioned from Adam as a branch sprouts a new tree
- He is urged to be fruitful
- A vegan diet was appropriate to his constitution
- Adam dwelled in a garden
- Leafy raiment
- Transgression via tree product
- Punishment is meted out via agricultural frustration
- His three sons parallel three functions of plant life:

basic sustenance (Kayin), growth (Hevel fed off of Kayin's
unsophisticated life and aspired to greater goals)
and reproduction (Shet provided lasting progeny)

The next chapters will examine this particularly Jewish theme in greater detail. It will be shown specifically how Noach and Avraham contributed their unique greatness and special qualities towards forging a Chosen People.

This *aliyah*'s opening verse ranks most curious. Have we not yet begun discussing man's chronicles? Three solutions to this conundrum are offered. First, prior events serve as a noteworthy background to grasp the Torah's overall message. Six days of creation, the seventh day of rest, Adam and Chavah's personal and family life all form an integral, if general picture. It forms a crucial Torah preface. However, at this juncture in the *parashah*, the focus turns to the epic's human face. Ten generations spanning Adam to Noach will now be discussed. The following *parashah* includes ten more successive generations delineating Avraham's ancestors and subsequently provides an outline for Avraham's progeny who are known as true Jewish patriarchs.

The story commences with Adam. Distinct from the earlier cosmological chapters, henceforth a different angle or slant emerges. It has flesh, bones, joints, tendons, sinews and most importantly pathos. Anthropocentrism is bolded and underscored. Human features and expressions assume order, meaning, and prominence. This is the greatest tale ever told.

Second, this metaphorical aspect of Torah discourse, alluding to the general motifs for mankind, featured prominently in previous chapters. That is now set aside. 'These are the chronicles of man.' Documented names and identities have been preserved from ancient times. Not one is mythical.

Finally, until now, the generation's moral compass needled towards woman. Her personality, ideals, and fantasies reared children and grandchildren with her perspective. That direction clashed fundamentally with the parallel lineage about to be described. Adam and Shet shifted gears, stamping this new family with a radically altered agenda. Chavah's anthropocentric universe crumbled. In its place wafted a heavenly scent. A tiny cadre of men – accountable to a set of principles written in rock – called back to the Almighty. They awaited further instruction. This, then, is the story of those few men of valor, fearful of Heaven. One trait bound them; they demanded the rigors of truth at any cost.

The Sages[95] deduced these ideas from the verse that teaches that 'Adam was one hundred and thirty when he gave birth to a son in his image and likeness.' That referred to Shet. Adam's first two sons were not in their father's likeness but rather in their mother's image. Homiletically speaking, the Sages[96] demonized Kayin and Hevel on account of their grossly misplaced values, goals and deeds. The fact is that Adam's first two descendants included individuals who became shadowy underworld figures, demons and liliths through their perverted notions and acts.

'On the day the Almighty created Adam, He made him in the Almighty's image.' This Torah account of humanity starts with progenitor Adam. Unique in the annals of history, Adam – just like his Maker – had no parents. Subsequent to Adam, offspring will not merit pure Divine likeness because two parents participate in reproduction. 'He created them male and female. And He blessed them and named them "Adam" on the day they were created.' Theirs was no latent potential of children, who are "men-in-waiting," so to speak. Immediately upon creation, mature Adam and Chavah possessed full intellectual and emotional faculties, deserving appellation as "man."

'When Adam turned one hundred and thirty he fathered a son in his likeness and image. He named him Shet.' Recall that after Adam ate from the Knowledge Tree fruit with Chavah, the couple copulated. Under the spell and influence of exaggerated exuberance, the conception and embryonic development of Kayin and Hevel (twin brothers born with twin sisters) went awry. Adam, after the elixir's glow wore off, was shocked indeed. Mortified and deeply disappointed at losing himself in the moment, he vowed never to have intimacy with Chavah. He exorcised, so to speak, the reeling effects and last traces of the Knowledge Tree's fruit. This introspection lasted for over a century. Hevel's childless demise together with Kayin and his offspring's death sentence forced Adam to reconsider his self-imposed celibacy. To be sure, more than one hundred years of grit, realignment, reassessment, and reevaluation had changed Adam. By the time he reached one hundred and thirty years of age, the man had returned to himself. He rekindled a spark that would warm his soul until his dying day. When Adam reconciled with Chavah, he was charged. Their intimacy produced Shet in Adam's new likeness

95. BT *Eruvin* 18b
96. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 22

and new image. Shet was born ennobled, rock solid. The entire balance of the planet rested on his shoulders. And he never tottered.

§§§

Generations come and generations go, but these first ten beginning with Adam and concluding with Noach need explanation. Firstly, how is the contemporary *Tanach* student supposed to deal with the logic-defying longevity? It resists reason to imagine human life spanning nine hundred years.

It is fallacious to assert that man's constitution has been altered. If that were the case, what would be the purpose of reading about them? They would be no different than mutant Martians and certainly not humans as we know them. It is just as inaccurate to advance a theory that time was calculated differently. If we attempted to shorten nine hundred years, say into nine hundred months, then we must also shorten the time when men married and had children. For example Mahalalel fathered a son at sixty five. If we cook the numbers to make exaggerated longevity plausible, then will we say he became a father at five years of age?

An additional problem arises. Longevity, as the generations proceeded, was shortened relatively quickly. Avraham died at one hundred and seventy five. If we substitute years for months, then the first patriarch died a teenager! And yet the Torah teaches that he reached a ripe old age. Just as laughable is Moshe's case. By this calculation, he died at age ten. The absurdity of retooling the years into months reaches mammoth proportions.

The Rambam[97] aptly concluded that the years mentioned are to be taken literally. He understood that the list of individuals reaching nearly a millennium numbers no more than a few, while other people of those generations lived regular life spans.

Longevity could be interpreted either as a natural or supernatural wonder. If the assumption posits that a select few naturally grew old then we can perhaps ascribe it to diet. They did not eat meat nor drink wine, subsisting on the bare minimum. Plants, herbs and water sustained them. The moderation of sexual activity that only began after they reached a one hundred underscored a simple, quiet, and wholesome lifestyle. This handful of devotees followed Adam's example and copied his methods. Clearly, countless others were free to

97. *Moreh Nevuchim* II:47

follow suit but likely concluded that that type of a regimen lacked appeal. More often than not, most men were simply not that focused and disciplined. For the masses, short-term fulfillment pulled the strings. The pursuit of unlimited sex and sex partners trumped everything else. That choice often included a regime of rich food and beverage to wash it all down.

Historically, there have always been individuals that for religious or health reasons, subsisted on little more than bread and water. Often they have longevity to attest to a simple, near-celibate life as an excellent extender. True, they are the infinitesimal exception. An overwhelming majority follows a vastly different path that all but guarantees abbreviated and truncated life spans.

There is another supernatural explanation for yesteryears' long life. Miracles were wrought for these few pious not so much because of their own merit but for humanity's benefit. Long life contributed to a more quickly populated world and also provided humanity with continuity of knowledge and brain power. This correctly presupposes that research and analysis are best accomplished within a stable setting and environment. Scientists who lived for centuries would be able to personally follow through with tests and theories. They would not have to waste idle time explaining to students entrusted to finish their projects. In this way, the Creator granted and tagged on centuries to masters in order for a new world to get caught up with the requisite knowledge for posterity. It follows that just as soon as this lofty aim was accomplished, lifespans rapidly began to shrink.

A third complementary approach[98] takes into account man's physical potential. Adam was Hashem's handiwork and designed to last. While it is true that sin effectuated change, the fact remains that Adam's physical frame had staying power. His perfect physique could adapt and survive. This suppleness was handed down to his descendants. Conditioned upon the right lifestyle choices, Adam's line consisted of a wonderful potency and potential. Vegan diets and moderation in sexual activity all pointed to a long life, especially if religious priorities marked quiet and simple goals. Note that of these ten generations, marriage did not take place until a man was sixty or seventy years old. Some men waited longer.

This idyllic picture began crumbling as a small sect of truth-seekers dwindled. The hoi polloi drifted toward troubled waters. When the Great Flood obliterated the world, it left in its wake a tampered environment and

98. *Ramban* 5:4

deteriorated damp air quality. Moisture from soggy, waterlogged soil produced inferior crops as key nutrients got washed out to sea. The post-flood diet began consisting of meat and wine. Motivation and interest in pristine ancestral values got shunted back. Survival of the fattest all but guaranteed a decreasing quantity and quality of life. Gluttonous new man evolved – backwards.

Reframing evolution, the Torah thus suggests three reasons for the punctuated and stingy human longevity. Using Adam as a measuring stick, all subsequent generations had moved away from his masterful built-in perfection. Each succeeding child born lost a precious little of the original specimen. The post-flood spoiled environment provides this second factor. The damage to topsoil in the form of erosion and loss of invaluable nutrients and minerals meant that the food chain lacked crucial food values. Clearly, man is what he eats and if his food has been deprived of key vitamins then a body's vitality must be proportionally compromised. The final factor had to do with generally decadent attitudes towards fitness. Ingesting meat and exaggerated, irresponsible wine intake personified a lackadaisical attitude towards sensible living. As a result many new illnesses and a general malaise became widespread. Hedonism spread and people gravitated towards sexual promiscuity. Obsession and utter lack of self-control brought new man to new lows. Marriage became common among teenagers whereas Shet's descendants had put it off by decades. Monogamy lost its appeal as flagrant wife-swapping and adultery took its place. All of these combined factors chipped away at the last vestiges of what once had been two strapping physical and intellectual specimens. Adam and Chavah, so to speak, would not recognize their children's evolution. They would be hard pressed to find commonality.

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Coming to terms with the first ten generations' longevity is not the only vexing issue. A second subject merits treatment. What did the Torah want to inculcate by providing detailed vital statistics for these select individuals? What can be learned from tracing their lives, time of marriages and deaths? Minimally, supplying such information established a long-running family pedigree tree. The Adam to Noach genealogy is traced and documented. Divine Providence granted those ten generations fantastic proliferation and repetitive firstborn sons. Another fascinating observation taught that Adam's reconciliation with Chavah at the age of one hundred and thirty set a standard. Namely, any of his

descendants who married earlier than that inevitably died "prematurely" while those descendants that put off marriage longer than Adam outlived him. Shet, Enosh and Kenan died younger than Adam because they married at an earlier age than he did. The math is straightforward. It seems that early male sexual activity and sexual excess are factors that curtail and shorten life. *Tanach* is rife with examples illustrating this. Kings David and Shlomoh are both cases in point.

A wonderful historical tidbit is noted by Josephus. He writes in his second book that Alexander the Great once travelled to an island called Parsiakin and found men resembling women. They subsisted on a raw fish diet and conversed in Greek. The locals shared their history with the super conquistador that included pride in an ancient grave. This was the grave of a king revered as most wise and knowing whose name was Kenan, son of Enosh! King Kenan prophetically foresaw a great flood which would drown an entire world. In his own day, Kenan experienced deluges that twice submerged significant segments of the planet.

This was all etched in Kenan's stone grave marker. Of particular interest was the fact that the writing had been in Hebrew. Alexander memorialized this eyewitness account in a letter to his mentor, Aristotle. Its contents are an excellent testimony to both creation's veracity as well as Hebrew being the language communicated to earliest mankind.[99]

At the age of sixty-five, Mahalalel rushed into marriage and fathered Yered. Displaying near inhuman resolve, Yered set aside his marriage longer than Adam had and merited more years than he. Yered's firstborn was Chanoch, another hero on the short list of mavericks. As the Hebrew name Chanoch implies, Yered fully gave himself over to his son's religious upbringing and education (*chinuch*).

Chanoch could not quite live up to his father's high and demanding personal standard. At the age of sixty-five he married and fathered Metushelach, his firstborn. However, the Torah relates, soon after this eldest was born 'Chanoch walked in Hashem's ways.' This alludes to a fundamental change and life transformation. As a relatively young man, Chanoch was beset by a strong sexual impulse which satisfied itself with early marriage. However, not long afterwards, Chanoch began intense searching into life's deeper significance. The early education received at his father's lap may have contributed to his growth. He, like his ancestors, never ascribed to celibacy and fathered sons and daughters.

99. See the third *aliyah* above for a discussion of this issue.

Apparently, Chanoch was greatly conflicted. The dual nature of man's reality weighed particularly heavy. As one of a handful chosen, he unquestionably rose to the challenge. He toiled in piety and excelled in detaching from society's contrived values. Yet, he could not quite find a way to be at total ease. It was a restless reconciliation, a nagging détente. Hashem observed Chanoch juggle his wife and familial obligations with his sincere strides for human perfection. Something had to give. In an anomaly, Chanoch's soul was freed, therefore, five centuries before the others of the ten generations from Adam to Noach. Appropriately, it seems that Hashem snatched the tenacious fighter, Chanoch, in a moment of religious ecstasy. 'And he was no longer for the Almighty summonsed him.'

No explicit verse provides testimony to Chanoch's virtues or exploits. However, there is a single clue. When the story of Chanoch is related it is always in conjunction with the Hebrew title for Hashem (*Elohim*) exclusively employed in the creation narrative. This likely intends to teach students that Chanoch's particular gateway to piety followed the path of keen observations of the heavens, orbits and other natural wonders. It is no coincidence that he died at precisely three hundred and sixty-five years of age. Profound appreciation and study of science, then, brought that polymath to the realization of a perfect Creator. Astronomer Chanoch, in a way, epitomized all that was unique about the ten generations and yet was taken away young. For his own good and after having achieved his life's calling, Chanoch's mighty soul departed. The Sages[100] count nine individuals who ascended alive heavenward. Chanoch blazed that trajectory first.

Seventh *aliyah*

'Metushelach lived one hundred and eighty seven years and sired Lemech.'

Metushelach's brilliant righteousness, in one sense at least, is unprecedented. The longest lifespan recorded in *Tanach* is attributed to his delayed marriage. His firstborn son was Lemech (not the same person who killed Kayin). Lemech, like his pious father, stalled matrimony. His eldest was Noach. According to the pattern that later marriage results in a longer life, Lemech's relatively early demise does not fit. Since he married older than most of his

100. Attributed to *Bereshit Rabbah*. Cf. *Derech Eretz Zuta* 1

ancestors, he should have lived longer than most of them. Yet, the Torah records that he died at seven hundred and seventy seven. A shorter life probably was the result of heavenly kindness. Hashem spared worthy Lemech from witnessing (and experiencing) the Great Flood.

Noach completed these ten generations that commenced with Adam. He embodied a purity and goodness unmatched by any of his most illustrious ancestors. Two areas, in particular, marked his greatness. First, Noach shunned marriage until he was five hundred years old.[101] That dwarfed all prior achievement by more than three centuries. Second, after his three sons were born, Noach separated from his wife altogether and discontinued marital relations. Without a doubt, Noach took this radical and unprecedented move because of his awareness that the apocalypse approached. He feared that continued intimacy with his wife would bear him daughters that would likely marry men who would die in the deluge. An eerily similar thing occurred with Lot's daughters. It will be seen in *Parashat Vayera*[102] that together with their husbands, they scoffed at their father's warnings and died in Sedom. Noach, of course, should have realized that he might father only sons and no daughters. Perhaps he felt that with impending catastrophe looming, sons also would scoff at his dire admonishments. Alternatively, he feared that he lacked sufficient merit to save them all.

It is fair to ask why Noach did not resume normal intimacy with his wife after the flood. We will learn in the next *parashah* about the family's post flood trauma and scandal.[103] Noach, in all probability, became jaded about bringing more children into the world. He had seen too much – both at home and outside of it – to hold out for great hope. Noach's abstinence, though, brought him great reward. Not only did he survive the flood waters, but he lived to the age of nine hundred and fifty years. This is noteworthy because, as written above, the post-flood environment weakened man's constitution and shortened his days.

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In summing up the general observations about the ten generations, phenomenal providence should not be overlooked or taken for granted. After all, this cadre of champions exhibited the greatest efforts at pleasing their Creator. At

101. This assumes that he did not previously marry Naamah as per *Chazal* above, fifth *aliyah*.
102. Chapter four, third *aliyah*
103. Chapter two, fourth *aliyah*

a time when societal values had been undermined and unhinged, these ten drew strength to buck the tide. As a reward, the Torah records their names, ages of marriage, sons' identities and age at death. Not a single firstborn son strayed from the lonely path of right. In a world of dangers and pitfalls, none were barren. No enemy force overwhelmed them in guile, battle or ambush. Indeed, the Almighty's protection shadowed them as they walked among those doomed in the valley of death.

Additionally, all of these righteous individuals, after matrimony, remained at their wife's side and continued normal relations. Besides the firstborns mentioned, countless other sons and daughters were born to them. (Noach was the exception to that rule.) The extended longevity granted to ten good men underscores the wonders that the Creator bestows. Adam's pattern of marriageable age set a high bar that gave his descendants attainable and admirable goals. While a general rule was established, the fact of the matter is that individual calculations yield statistical standard deviations vis-à-vis abstinence/longevity in precise correlation. There is, after all, no accounting for why two people eating from same pan and the exact dish will have different reactions.

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A third point needs to be made about a seemingly curious and superfluous postscript to these ten men's lives. After recording how long the given individual lived, the Torah wrote 'and they died.' Does that obvious finality need to be conveyed? If, for example, Shet was one hundred and five when he fathered Enosh and then lived exactly eight hundred and seven years, is it not abundantly clear that he died at the age of nine hundred and twelve? Why state the obvious? By comparison, the successive ten generations from Noach to Avraham do not have their deaths mentioned. Likely, the answer lies in that these ten men – whose names and identities are explicitly written – were outstanding individuals. The evidence follows. The Sages[104] discuss Adam's transformation and renewal including his long periods of isolation and celibacy. The verse alludes to Shet's greatness as he was born in the Almighty's image and likeness. Enosh's name tips off students to the fact that he attained manhood (*enoshut*) and chivalry. As a result of Enosh's singular sense of purpose, religious revivalism sprouted in his time. Kenan made it his life's passion

104. BT *Eruvin* 18b

and work to acquire (*kinyan*) a good name and reputation for integrity. Song and praise of the Almighty's works poured from Mahalalel's mouth (*mehalel El*). Yered took self-control (*rediyah*) to new meaning and heights. Champion Chanoch walked with the Maker in a way reserved for Noach and Avraham. Mighty Metushelach, according to the Sages,[105] was a saint most holy. Lemech, too, was beloved to his Creator. Hashem had seen that man's monumental struggles and victories. Divine affection called him to death relatively early in order to protect him from beholding a world crumbling. Noach's unique resolve resounded in the verses praising him. The Almighty found him compelling and charming. What, then, does the writing of their deaths convey?

Hashem held back the devastating flood waters until a hoary elite lived out all of their years. The dam did not break until those righteous and pure few expired peacefully in bed. Even death-defying ancient Metushelach passed away one week before all hell let loose. Not one would cast an eye upon calamity when it pounded the earth's four corners.

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With three general observations complete, the *parashah* winds down with the particulars of the last of the ten generations. Metushelach fathered Lemech who in turn fathered Noach. Lemech 'called his son Noach saying this one will comfort me from our deeds and from our anguish that the accursed land' had wrought. Plausibly, Hashem's curse of the land was meant to expire with Adam's death. Consider the math:

Adam → Shet	130
Shet → Enosh	105
Enosh → Kenan	90
Kenan → Mahalalel	70
Mahalalel→Yered	65
Yered→Chanoch	162
Chanoch → Metushelach	65
Metushelach → Lemech	187
Lemech → Noach	182
TOTAL	**1056**

105. BT *Sanhedrin* 108b

Given that Adam passed away at nine hundred and thirty, Noach was born one hundred and twenty six years after Adam passed away. Noach ushered in a new lease on life since he was the only member of the small clique born to a different reality. Land's curse concluded. Lemech and his generation were jubilant, hoping that a return to good earth would be within reach. Noach's birth resounded like a harbinger of relief from Adam and Kayin's folly.

Alternatively, Lemech knew instinctively or prophetically that Noach would survive the impending flood. That comfort was unimaginable. As horrible as Adam and Kayin's sins and respective punishments were, they paled in comparison to Lemech and Noach's blighted peers.

The Sages[106] saw this passage as providing fitting closure to the story that Adam began and Noach completed. They understood that Adam and Chavah's sin revolved around sexual impropriety as a result of eating the Knowledge fruit. Tradition[107] teaches that Noach was "born circumcised" – he waited five hundred years before taking a wife, sublimating his sexual impulse. It cannot be overlooked, then, that Noach effectively completed the catharsis that Adam had necessitated. A full ten generations were needed to right the wrong. And the earth, for a brief second, shook and shimmied free. Her shackles loosened.

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Ten good men accomplished big things, but they measured infinitesimally. Everyone around them danced to a different beat. And samba they did. 'Hashem saw how evil people had become.' While there are secret layers that unravel how the moral and ethical boundaries got blurred and eventually erased, two common sense approaches can be forwarded to answer this seemingly difficult verse that ascribes misdoing to *bnei elohim. Malachim* are, after all, heavenly facilitators and part of the otherworldly supernatural apparatus. As such, it lies squarely in the realm of impossibility and mythology for them to materialize, let alone cohort with humans.

Approach number one is to understand these *bnei elohim* in terms of a high caste, nobility. Shet's descendants, in comparison to Kayin's offspring, were *bnei elohim* – cut from a different cloth. Kayin's children, due to their coarseness and crudeness were called *bnot Adam* or earthy stock – in an ethical sense. The verse suggests that the exponential growth proved corrosive

106. Attributed to *Bereshit Rabbah*. Cf. *Tanchuma Bereshit* 11
107. *Tanchuma Noach* 5

for two reasons. First, large pockets of people felt overconfident and overly self-reliant. This led to laxity in morals and tradition. Ethical fences got clawed and mauled. Second, more females were born. Tracking a trend, in the very beginning Adam and Chavah were and remained monogamous. The same held true for Kayin and his twin sister. However, as more and more girls were born, men slipped into patterns of polygamy. Soon this mindset led to high-voltage debauchery, spinning out of any semblance of control. Sex-crazed values mired civilization.

In such a frenzied milieu, a majority of Shet's descendants got into the act. So much emphasis was placed on voluptuousness, glamour, and sex-appeal that the *bnei elohim* courted and married exclusively for looks. It mattered little if a couple shared common goals, ideals, or dreams. It got worse.

Eventually even marital status accounted for nothing. What mattered was one thing: physical attraction and infatuation. Distraction hit a fevered pitch; people were hurtling into morass and oblivion. A finely tuned scale weighing spirituality and materialism went berserk; mankind flailed hopelessly. The failure to grasp recognition of refined character traits as the only basis for a good marriage and solid children resulted in a rootless, groundless society. The earth's foundations rumbled and shook but nobody seemed to care. A holocaust lurked, stalked.

'Men took women of their choosing.' Against common sense and better judgment, suitors ignored looking into a girl's parental or sibling values as the Sages[108] had urged. Relationships were skin deep. The reality is that man's reason is capable of misleading him if not constantly tuned with authentic religious values. The physical part of man, it goes without saying, is prey to seduction. Humankind is thus in an extremely precarious predicament. Even in the best of circumstances that scale is delicate, fragile. Acknowledging just how morally challenged people tend to be, Hashem set damage control and placed a ceiling limit for 'man's lifespan to number one hundred and twenty years.'

Ancient philosophers correctly understood that all living organisms are allotted a general lifespan timeframe. In the case of man that limit approached one hundred and twenty years as attested to by Moshe's longevity. The Torah writes that 'Moshe died at a hundred and twenty while in good

108. BT *Bava Batra* 110a

and vital physical health.'[109] Even Aharon's death at the age of one hundred and twenty three is essentially the maximum time allotted to man. Having said that, it bears mention that Noach far exceeded that human limit because Divine decree did not take immediate effect. The verse relates that eventually man's extended longevity, enjoyed by the ten righteous, would cease altogether.

A final point is that people were not guaranteed to hit the century mark. Man's constitution and composition *could* reach that ripe old age – all things being equal. Obviously, several factors such as genetics, environment, and lifestyle significantly figured in the equation. The Almighty taught that if a person was truly interested in personal growth, piety, and trait refinement, one hundred and twenty would be sufficient time to attain those meaningful goals. A long life was not in favor of anyone content to fritter that precious gift away. It would be tantamount to driving in the wrong direction longer. It simply lands passengers at more inappropriate destinations. Another point about setting limits to human longevity is that ideally, it contributes to reflection, focus, and urgency.

The Torah tells that '*nephilim* (fallen ones) roamed the earth.' These "fallen ones" refer to the *bnei elohim*'s offspring. Misconception clouded noble born young men. Conveniently, they believed that children's natures and tendencies are forged exclusively by paternal lines. Thus most of Shet's descendants rationalized that they could take the stunning daughters of Kayin and not be concerned about the mother's stunted moral upbringing. These dalliances would be a grave, costly miscalculation assuming that those errant folks even bothered to analyze where things went haywire. Biological facts cannot be disputed. Both parents exert equal influence over determining their offspring's makeup. The result would be crystal clear to predict. Marriage mismatches tended to produce kids according to the lowest common denominator. It was, it seems, the dominant human trait.

A division of 'mighty men of renown' arose. This is a tongue-in-cheek description of how the mighty (Shet's line) had fallen hard. Like a great, royal king that took a trophy peasant wife, the charade is exposed as tasteless, debased, and lusty.

In approach number one presented until now, the narrative exposes practically all of Shet's descendants as willing to walk away from sense and

109. *Devarim* 34:7

sensibility because they were enthralled by sensual and voluptuous partners. The second approach takes a different tack. Namely, the Torah calls a particular strain of Shet's line *bnei elohim* because of their gargantuan lifespan. This nomenclature was intended to be poetic or metaphorical. Perhaps these individuals who resembled *malachim* possessed beautiful and chiseled physical features. The Torah's observation would then be that these abundantly handsome and striking men betrayed Shet and co.'s moral standards and regime. When they beheld plebian pretty daughters, whose life spans dwarfed in comparison to their own, they ran off with them. Such couples would make a funny sight on account of their different make-ups. True, both the man and woman possessed bewitchingly good looks, but that was where their physical similarities ended. The male had fitness, bone density and muscle tone far superior to the female's. In comparison, she looked more like his petite, frail doll.

Hashem had acted leniently with Adam and Kayin, pronouncing that their judgment would reflect man's delicate blend of spirituality and materialism. Ameliorating circumstances stayed their execution verdicts. The Divine tribunal had noted then that 'man's evil machinations take early root in his psyche.' But now man was sternly warned that such liberal rulings would not always be the case. The logic assumed that youth and youthful mistakes need not derail a person indefinitely. Attainable tools including mature reasoning and grounded analysis fortified an individual, guarding him from folly. But with Kayin outdoing his father's crime, and subsequent generations excavating depths of sin yet lower than Hevel's murder, patience seemed pointless. A one hundred twenty year window of opportunity – and bestial humanity would find itself at the end of a very short leash.

The warning went unheeded and *bnei elohim* continued to chase diminutive doll-girls. However, due to the shame of open rebellion against Hashem's admonition, the *bnei elohim*'s defiance went underground. Of course the secret could not remain under wraps for long because the playmates got pregnant and had children. These were the *nephilim* ("fall outs") who 'fell out' of the womb before full term. Divergent parental physiology caused premature births. The narrative described how the radically different body builds of the massive *bnei elohim* versus the relatively Lilliputian *bnot* Adam resulted in premature births. The delicate, tiny mothers lacked the ability to go full term because the father's sperm created an embryo fit to emulate its large-framed

dad. These children taking after their extra sized fathers were 'the mighty men of renown.' The phenomenon of premies born of mismatched parents growing into robust men repeated in those first generations and in subsequent ones.[110]

Generations of deep disappointment multiplied. 'Hashem watched how degenerated man walked the earth, filling the day with machination and perversion.' Mankind intentionally distanced themselves from eternal truths and purpose. Sin ran rampant. Aristotle pegged it when he analyzed transgression. If someone was misguided as a result of an isolated act, it could be repaired by the cessation of wrong. However, if the misdeed came about as a result of forethought and a cohesive scheme, then eradicating it would be near impossible. This latter scenario aptly described the world's first generations. Folly became a way of life, a way of doing business. Sensation replaced sense. Days of shame and indecency grew to weeks, months to years. The rut was measured by unpunctuated centuries; smut by millennium. 'The Creator regretted putting man on earth.'

The verse has difficulties. Why man *on earth* underscored instead of regret about making man, period? Why the particular Name of the Almighty that alludes to Divine compassion and mercy? Plausibly, it was specifically the earthy or the materialistic aspect of man's makeup that is highlighted as the main culprit to misguiding him. The Merciful One pitied man's pure soul and reasoning ability. In horror, Hashem watched man's sullied, base side jab, kick, and knock down an entire world. Note that the Creator's disdain stemmed from His affection for man's soul, a heavenly spark. Regret, then, was the reaction to a pristine soul's interconnectedness with a lower bodily creation of earth's dust. There was no blanket remorse about mankind as a whole.

Turning to the theological question regarding the Almighty's nature, what is this regret about? When a person, in contrast, blunders, regret is a possible reaction to making a silly mistake. Hashem, to state the obvious, cannot err. But from the view of an objective observer it appears as disillusionment or regret. Take for example a metaphor of a farmer who works diligently and plants a fruit tree. After years of toil and result, the time comes to prune one or two branches for grafting purposes. From a perspective of an outside observer, the farmer's sawing action appears as one who is fed up with the tree

110. See *Bamidar* 13:33

and cuts its branches in despair. In reality, the farmer had planned this tree husbandry from the very outset.

The Torah is not, therefore, teaching that the Creator regretted making man. All knowledge lies perfectly before Hashem. The point is that Hashem commented, so to speak, that man consisting of earth's clay and infused with a holy soul would flounder and blunder. Furthermore, it was clear to where the first generations' population would gravitate. The Torah lamented the human condition that produced pitifully minuscule and infinitesimal fit results.

Myriads of seeds yielded a meager one or two sequoia. Major and continual tweaking, contortion and retooling on the body politic patched man back together, but fixing mankind began with tearing him down. And man, on the loose, did his own dirty work, doing himself in. It was not pretty, especially for a Most Benevolent Creator. Omelets can't be made, so the saying goes, without cracking eggs. Collectively and with moral evolution, mankind slowly learned *and remembered* the lessons. Foreknowledge, as it were, did not soften Hashem's reaction to the long, tedious process.

Hashem's 'regret' became 'consternation.' Man fumbled perpetually. It was repulsive to witness man sinking lower in the muck. The dawn of day disposed of yesterday's squalor as new man thought fresh about concocting more societal stench. Hashem 'resolved to obliterate mankind.' The Creator's decision included animals, as well. It was not as if animals deserved, per se, punishment. They are, after all, secondary to man. Thus, wiping out of the primary creation means that an auxiliary animal kingdom forfeited its *raison d'etre.* The Sages[111] compared the situation to a king who prepared a lavish banquet for his son's wedding. When the king learned of his plotting son's betrayal and coup attempt, he had him executed. Next the king destroyed the wedding canopy for now it served no purpose.

Hashem's general decree did not extend to Noach since he found grace in the Creator's eyes. He, the last and tenth crafted personality beginning with Adam, had kept his distance from morass.

111. *Bereshit Rabbah* 28:6

CHAPTER TWO

PARASHAT NOACH

A FAMILY AFLOAT

First *aliyah*

'This is Noach's life story.
Noach was a righteous and virtuous person of those times;
Noach walked in the Almighty's ways.'

Parashat Bereshit introduced Adam, the very first man and chronicled – in shorthand – his mostly bumbling descendants. This *parashah* teaches Hashem's attempt at a better, more workable human race. Noach's life will be described in detail unprecedented by any prior persona. Despite the introduction to Noach and his three sons at the end of *Parashat Bereshit,* this *parashah* restates the same information. Note two reasons. First, earlier Noach was listed in the same context as his illustrious ancestors, beginning with Adam – all men that reached a higher storey of religious awareness. However, Noach's acclaim deserved singling out. His sons' names are repeated, launching a wider unfolding of Noach's story. Second, the prior *parashah* concluded with the remark that 'Noach found favor in Hashem's eyes.' *Parashat Noach* elaborates on the specific traits that spared him and his family from the Great Flood.

Noach's life was, to put it lightly, quite eventful. The Torah praises his righteous and virtuous nature – two separate attributes. The first refers to his fair-minded interaction with others in his community; he was honest. Despite the lying and cheating going on around him, Noach remained principled. Secondly, his life was an imposing study in moderation. This marked him apart from others in his generation who gravitated, if you will, to the call of the jungle. Noach's inner beat walked to a different drummer that was able to drown out his boisterous neighbors. Authentic fear of the Almighty set his

path and best defined his essence. He could not have contrasted more starkly with his morally enervated environs. To put it succinctly, the world at large sated their bellies but starved their soul. Noach had sensible priorities. He never wavered because he achieved presence of mind. He was a most steady, dependable rock of Gibraltar.

In fact, Noach towered over his base brethren. But how would he compare to the greats of his era? The lives of priestly Shem, erudite Eiver and iconoclastic Avraham (Avraham was nearly sixty when Noach passed away) overlapped with Noach's. How did he measure up to them? The Torah is likely not comparing Noach to those select three whose service and dedication to the Creator reverberated with profound love. Noach's greatness lay in his tenacious adherence to the straight path precisely while the overwhelmingly vast majority was, so to speak, swinging from the rafters. No small feat.

Hashem graced Noach in several aspects, one of which was modest family size. Noach dedicated himself to his three sons in a way that would have been much more challenging in a larger family. Presumably, outside influences would have taken their toll on Noach's sons if three were six or eight. Hashem also may have spared Noach of daughters because they would, perforce, have married men with lesser values and standards.

And there was no denying that the generation turned quite degenerate. The Torah attests to 'the land filled with corruption.' Sins fell into two main categories. The first type followed a pattern of misconstrued or a total lack of healthy religious outlook and behavior, descending into sexual depravity, while the second depicted a lawless societal structure replete with unscrupulous family and business ethos. Noach's peers had veered so severely from decency that it became the mindset and rule – etched in stone. There was virtually no escaping the determined derailment of an entire populace. The Sages[1] homiletically added that even the animal kingdom perverted its conventional ways and mated unnaturally.

Hashem saw where this intentional misguidedness was going. And the direction was way off. Even generously allowing for man's body and soul dichotomy, the flood folks were fatally flawed. Not merely lacking moral heroics; theirs was a skewed overall attitude. Why, Hashem asked rhetorically, was man not pursuing a modicum of civic responsibility and ethical backbone?

1. BT *Sanhedrin* 108a

No reasonable answer came to mind. Disappointment and disgust was the Creator's response to a lost, expendable generation.

Noach received a command to 'make an ark from gopher wood.' Implicit in the directive was for Noach to distance himself from his bad neighbors and prepare for an emergency sea evacuation. The Sages[2] taught that despite the warning's dire nature, it was in fact only a warning. Widespread societal and moral change could avert a catastrophe. Noach used those ensuing *one hundred and twenty years* to plant sturdy wood trees, cut them down and construct an ark on a colossal scale. All this bustle of activity did not evoke or prompt much interest let alone curiosity in their shipwright neighbor's project. Distraction, as it were, blinded and deafened them to Noach – abuzz with sawing trees, chiseling and planing lumber, weaving straps, lashing planks, and sealing seams.

Hashem specifically requested that Noach build an ark and not a boat or ship. It had no masts, oars or sails – it was a triangular hull built to withstand sustained water pressure. Four factors figure into its fabrication:

- *Manufacture* Noach was entrusted to be the sole ark builder. No delegating.
- *Materials* Light wood needed to be utilized to make it floatable.
- *Form* Proportionality, internal subdivisions of varied size, and exterior waterproof pitch were crucial. Its measurements were set at three hundred cubits length by fifty width by thirty height. The float was seaworthy.
- *Function* The ark would practically and comfortably house a family clan and a significant animal menagerie so that their needs could be met for a year at sea. All practical engineering preparation went into making the ark functional. Decks were slanted to allow rain to run off into the ocean; a sunroof maximized light usage; side entrance ways and exits allowed easy access and egress; three stories gave space. Noach and his family resided in the top tier, some animals and fodder in the middle and the bottom tier housed the remainder of the animal passengers with their feed. Finally, the ark's main function was unambiguous. The Torah writes that Hashem 'is bringing a flood to the world but that a covenant is being made with you (Noach).' The ark's main purpose, then, was to save and preserve Noach and his family.

2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 30:7

The Sages[3] stressed that the deluge was an act of direct Divine Providence and not a natural calamity. The flood had, for a while, suspended immutable nature. Oxymoron. Devastation came en masse, sparing none. As discussed at the end of *Parashat Bereshit*, the animals' deaths underscored the fact that the Creator had made a man-centered world. The punishment that wiped out people impacted animals as well.

Hashem promised to maintain His covenant with Noach. What was this pact? It should be recalled that one of the first acts of creation consisted of sweeping away the waters that submerged land. A clear demarcation achieved the separation between the oceans and land mass. Nature committed, so to speak, to the unnatural arrangement wherein water remains confined. When mankind now blurred morality's contours, Hashem rescinded nature's borders as well. A breach is a breach – measure for measure. Noach kept his ethical lines sharp, crisp and thus merited Divine protection. Water breaking its natural levees would not submerge the righteous maverick nor would tsunamis sweep him away. The ark carried the family aloft. Hashem's covenant with hydro nature, facilitating the existence of life on land, would be fulfilled via Noach and his progeny. At the end of the day, the world, Hashem promised, belonged to Noach.

Noach was directed to bring 'pairs of animals to the ark to survive along with you.' The missive was not specific as to how many animals should be brought along. The term "pair" only meant that an even number of female and male was paramount. Also, Noach did not have to go around coaxing, trapping, and schlepping the animals aboard. They showed up of their own accord. Note another development. Animals generally mate and then blend into herds. But for this expedition, the male and female paired up and presented themselves to Noach.

Noach did not trouble himself to bring along particular fodder for each species. Instead, Heaven decreed that the collective diet for this trip consist only of herbs, grain and straw – even for meat-eaters. Vegan regimes serve to calm carnivores because ingesting carrion exacerbates cruel viciousness and other undesirable traits. In that sense the ark preceded Yeshayahu's prophecy promising the end-of-days' ideal pastoral setting when the wolf lies with the sheep, the tiger with the goat.[4] Besides Noach's fauna collection, he also

3. BT *Rosh Hashanah* 11b
4. *Yeshayahu* 11:6–77

brought on board all kinds of flora that would not have survived the Great Waters. Seeds, saplings, spices and such were preserved for prosperity.

The post-flood world would lack nothing. Thus, Noach's provisions included food for a long sea sojourn as well as a wonderful potpourri for when the raft beached, and life would carry on as before. Noach was undoubtedly apprised of the length of time he would have to spend in the ark, and was taught about animal life's natures and feeding habits. The Sages[5] learn that Noach brought particular fodder for each of the menagerie members on board.

Conserving space and logistics was obviously an issue, and the quantity of species spared took planning and discretion into account. Still, the verse records a peculiar accounting ledger entry. Namely, 'of the kosher animals' Hashem bid Noach 'to take pairs of sevens into the ark' in contrast to two pair for non-kosher types. How was Noach to know which animals constituted kosher and which ones *treif*? Presumably Noach, a cognoscente, understood nature's intricacies of botany, agriculture, farming, and zoology. Given that, he grasped intuitively which animals possessed pure or impure traits. At Mount Sinai, Noach's sharp eye would be translated into kosher and non-kosher categories, the basis of the dietary laws that the Jewish line of his descendants would forever abide and keep. Noach brought along more kosher types because:

- They were to be permitted for consumption post-flood
- They were permitted for animal sacrifice
- They were low-maintenance compared to the voracious carnivores on board

Second *aliyah*

'And the Almighty said to Noach: "Come and bring your family to the ark for I have found you righteous [compared] to your generation."'

The Torah records that the deluge began in the 'second month.' Though the Sages[6] differ on the precise month when the floodgates burst, it is more likely that the waters gushed in *Cheshvan* and not *Iyyar*. Time had been set

5. *Bereshit Rabbah* 31:14
6. BT *Rosh Hashanah* 11b

to commemorate creation (*Tishrei* was the original first month, *Cheshvan* the second etc.) until the Jews left Egypt and marked months according to that monumental event (*Nisan* became the first month, *Iyyar* the second etc.).[7] When the flood's seven-day countdown began, Hashem told Noach to prepare for boarding. Two possible explanations account for the seemingly repetitious verses describing the scene of embarkation. The first one follows the Sages' tradition.[8] That is, initially the Torah recorded the story in general, broad strokes. Noach and his family arrived at the ark when he had turned six hundred years of age. Joining them were a bevy of animals that Noach specifically chose to preserve. Since details had not been provided regarding launch timing tables or the duration of the preparation, these descriptions were provided in the second more elaborate narrative. These apparently picayune particulars lend credence and weight to their veracity. Allegory has no use for boilerplate. Additionally, dates like the month/day/year of Noach's life peg the event with precision. Students should understand that while the accuracy of these facts is unassailable, the language recounting the event does utilize hyperbole. 'Bursting wells of the depths' and 'heavenly chimney openings' are figurative images designed to depict a deluge's unrelenting momentum. In fact, underground reservoirs and aquifers combined with driving rains to flood and saturate the earth. An ocean bed groundswell.

The Divine dire warning foretold that 'rain will pour down consecutively for forty days and forty nights wreaking total devastation upon the land.' 'On the seventh day,' the Torah writes 'flood waters covered the land.' On the day the torrential rains began with no time to spare, 'Noach and his sons Shem, Cham and Yephet, Noach's wife and his three sons' wives all alighted on the ark on that very day.' That selfsame day witnessed a mad ark-bound dash of all the flora and fauna – with floodwaters gushing and hurricanes gusting to boot. This feat clearly defied logic, beggaring human understanding given the task's sheer immensity. Miracle and supernatural must have assisted this herculean undertaking.

The second explanation views these verses differently. Hashem gave word for 'Noach and family to climb aboard.' This need not be understood in terms of a "last boarding call" to Noach and his family. Rather a seven-day long mobilization allowed the family to proceed at a more reasonable clip. This, of

7. See Abravanel's discussion of the New Year and New Moon in *Shmot* (pp. 90–95).
8. *Bereshit Rabbah* 32:6

course, eased and lightened loading logistics. Parallel is found in a commandment issued to Moshe. Hashem told him to climb the Mount from where he could gaze his eyes on the Promised Land that he could never enter, and he did so.[9] This was not however Moshe's final scan of Eretz Yisrael. He climbed and descended multiple times before his last longing look just prior to his death.[10]

Additionally, seven days gave Noach the opportunity to inspect and handpick those species fittest to bring along. Only the finest made the grade and were called upon to populate and roam the earth after the flood waters receded. Noach was most likely not apprised of the exact shove-off date. However when the Almighty commanded Noach to bring seven pair of kosher animals, that probably tipped off this ancient mariner that embarkation was seven days away. Those seven days marked the final week of the one hundred and twenty years allotted a wayward civilization to shape up. At that point, shipping out was no longer an option for anyone but Noach and his family.

'Noach did as Hashem commanded him' refers to his bustling about preparing for the imminent day of reckoning. He harbored no doubts that the unthinkable would happen. Interestingly enough, not all of Noach's family shared his sense of urgency. Those final seven days started off no differently than any other. The shipmaster was whooshing in and out of the content-swelling ark, but his family saw no rush. They did not heed Hashem's commandment, per se, to prepare. At some time during the first of those seven days, though, spring showers spattered. Immediately, they grasped Noach's oft-repeated message. Though the first rains came lightly, it was enough to galvanize family members who comprehended that this drizzle would end in deluge. Noach, it goes without saying, learned nothing new from those initial raindrops. The Torah refers to him as a pious individual. He believed in an imminent holocaust from the very outset. To be exact, one hundred and twenty years earlier when Hashem's haunting words to Noach contemplated the end of all man, it was real. He did not require gales, earthquakes, or any other visual aid.

Joining Noach's family in the ark were all the animals that had heeded a Divine clarion call that broadcasted on survival instinct's wavelength. During this "drill" period, Noach and his family had frenzied last minute preparation efforts. Even the animals were milling around during those seven days. On

9. See *Bamidbar* 27:12–13,22
10. See *Devarim* 22:49–50

day seven, the full power of the deluge was unleashed. Man and beast entered the ark and stayed put. To afford greater detail the Torah relates that Noach reached his six hundredth year when the sluicegates crashed. Mark the notorious date: the seventeenth of *Cheshvan*. This served to clarify the flood's second stage. Namely, after this seven-day first rain period, only a shallow puddle layer of water straddled the land. But on the seventeenth, the flood came with a vengeance. 'Hashem closed the ark doors behind them.' This means that water levels had reached a point that made exit impossible. Divine Providence saw to it that neither the strong winds nor pounding surf would jar that door open.

Third *aliyah*

'And the flood continued for forty days upon the earth. When the waters increased they carried the ark, lifting it above the ground.'

With the passengers safe inside the ark, floods stormed the planet for forty consecutive days and nights. The verse's sequence implies that the bulky ark, like a beached whale, did not actually budge from its berth for a full forty days. Very plausibly, the Torah's repetition of the forty day phase suggests two different sources of water. Cold driving rain joined with scalding waters that originated in the earth's depths.

As with all *Tanach* miracles, it is imperative to understand the actual mechanics because even supernatural ends must, per se, work through existing resources. Take the flood's case. The skies' thick clouding prevented the sun's warmth from reaching the earth. The planet's natural heat did not dissipate into the atmosphere, but pressure cooked beneath the surface. Swells needed an outlet. The earth's crevices and fissures provided that outlet; a monstrous, uncontainable leak ensued. The natural explanation for this heavenly rain source has to do with raincloud moisture contributing to the atmospheric air levels assuming water condensation qualities. The cycle promoted additional wetness and rain. These explanations clarified the two methods by which the floodwater levels rose, eventually lifting up the ark on day forty.

The Torah offers a third deluge description wherein 'the waters added and increased upon the earth submerging all the mighty mountains.' This teaches that water levels not only inundated the flat plains but stretched higher and higher as when a bathtub is plugged. Finally the fourth high mark was reached.

'Water fifteen cubits high covered' everything. Flats, hills, and mountains slunk beneath twenty to thirty feet of ubiquitous water.

Devastation spared no one and no place. 'All living things died without a trace,' the Torah repeats. These superficially superfluous verses teach that in addition to the human and animal destruction all existence passed into oblivion. Trees, bushes, grass, herbs; towers, buildings, granaries, houses – all wiped away. Chastened and expunged, a planet got mopped clean. Only Noach and his ark stayed afloat, alive.

'For one hundred and fifty days the flood waters' ran amok. The verse has caused misunderstanding among commentators. It means that despite the original creation's clear separation of dry land from the seas, waters raged and ravaged the earth's surface for one hundred and fifty days. It appears that after the first forty days, water conquered the land, submerging even the highest mountain peaks fifteen cubits deep. On day forty one, this high-mark level slowly began to recede. Until one hundred and fifty days after the deluge onset, the earth was still covered to a certain but lesser degree. To summarize: the rain stormed and reservoirs surged for forty days and nights. Day forty-one to day one hundred-fifty witnessed water abatement but it continued to cover the earth's surface.

'Hashem remembered Noach.' On day forty one, the shipfitter's merit tipped the Divine scales towards leniency and relief. Strong winds and gales began whipping the waters back, relegating them to their places. This occurred over the next one hundred and ten days. Back underground is where the tamed waters headed. On day one hundred fifty, the ark grounded on Mt. Ararat. The propitious date was the seventeenth of *Nisan*. The passengers did not disembark for water surrounded them. The next significant date is roughly three months later, the first days of *Tammuz*, when the mountaintops began to appear.

Noach, seeing the tallest mountaintops, 'threw open the window.' A raven was released from this sunroof. To clarify, two actions are described. First, the sunroof had, on occasion, been opened. Peaks were spotted from that vantage point. Second, the sunroof served as the spot from where the raven was set loose. Noach's experiment with the raven was intended to determine if any human-built structures like houses, palaces or towers still stood. Since ravens build nests there, it would tip off Noach to the extent of the flood's damage. When the raven returned, the ark's captain began to assess and comprehend the scope of the loss. The raven repeatedly came and went. It remained close by until the family left the ark. Noach did not bother trying to retrieve it nor

did the bird think to reenter the ark. The raven's behavior is a discussion topic of the Sages,[11] who offer a somewhat disparaging explanation of his coy tango.

Next, Noach 'sent out the dove to determine if the water receded from the earth.' Doves nest in treetops. Hence after this feathered friend's first excursion and return to the ark, Noach was apprised that trees remained submerged. The gentle bird came back to Noach's ark because it needed protection – quite different than its hardier raven cousin. Putting these initial bird forays into perspective, the following explanation accounts for a straightforward reading of the passage.

When crests became visible, an abundance of olive tree branches could be readily found. They had floated on the water's surface but when the summits peeped above the subsiding waters some branches settled, taking root randomly. The dove pulled at one of the forty to fifty day old saplings, bringing an olive leaf to Noach. On the dove's third outing, owing to ample food sources available, it did not circle back to the ark.

Forty days had elapsed from the time that Noach had first opened the window until he released the raven. A total of three dove sendoffs took place at one week intervals. What does the Torah desire to teach with these details? Undoubtedly, when Noach spotted the mountain tops, waiting forty days assumed significance. Forty, of course, consists of ten sets of four:

- Four heavenly and celestial groupings represent a particular holiness that interfaces with natural life forces.
- Four is the amount of essential elements that comprise the world.
- Four types of objects span the inanimate, plant, sense-endowed and speech-capable.

The number forty has an independent mystique:

- Human conception forms embryos in forty days.
- Moshe's Sinai experience lasted forty days.
- The botched Jewish spy expedition into Israel tallied forty days.
- Desert wandering dallied forty years.
- Forty days is the period that witnesses Jewish closeness and conciliation with the Almighty every single year down to the present. These are the days from the beginning of the month of *Elul*, culminating with Yom Kippur.

11. BT *Sanhedrin* 108b. See also BT *Ketubot* 49b regarding the raven's callous treatment of its young, explaining why the raven did not enter the ark.

Wisely, Noach calculated that if the Creator's wrath poured down driving rain for forty days, then that same timeframe would mark forgiveness. Exactly on the fortieth day, he opened the window. The sight surprised him because trees or towers had not appeared. At that time, a raven was released. Day by day, though the waters subsided, it still was not the view that Noach expected to see. A dove was sent free, returned and released after one week separations. From the raven to the last of the dove's missions, four weeks passed. Significantly, this corresponds to the moon's four phases. Tides ebb and flow with those lunar phases. Numerate Noach acted according to the moon and the tides' interplay. Thus a month's full cycle of the birds' circling was added to the forty days of anchored ark anticipation.

Noach reached his six hundredth and first year. On the first day of the first month (*Tishrei*) the waters dried from the earth, and soil again reappeared. Utter destruction stared back at him: A wasteland devoid of human, animal or plant life. Not a trace of civilization remained. Not a building. Not a wall. Devastation as far as the eye could see.

Noach had thought that while the earth had been submerged, at least it would leave muddy moisture, clay in abundance. He spent the entire second month practically paralyzed while trying to come to grips with a new world order. On the twenty seventh day of the second month (*Cheshvan*), Noach apprehended a dryness of a world comparable to that which existed before the flood. That was precisely when the Divine command bid Noach to leave the ark. The sojourn had lasted a full solar year and ten days.[12]

Reviewing the flood episode provides four important lessons:

- Taken in the context of the creation story, this watershed event validates the existence of the Supreme Being. For man, connectedness to the Creator defines the wholeness of the human experience. The flood's consequences highlight and underscore the rule of Divine Providence, reward and punishment. Heavenly justice will be served. Prophecy is the vehicle whereby the Almighty communicated with Noach, informing him of future events.

12. This time span appears in the Abravanel. The source is unclear, as it is normally assumed that the Deluge lasted precisely one full solar year, from 17 *Tammuz* to the 27th of the following year, totaling 365 days (see e.g. *Rashi* here to 8:14). Indeed, the Abravanel himself mentions the year-long duration earlier in this *parashah*. Perhaps a lunar year plus ten days was intended.

- As the creation story introduced a concept of the world's existence, by inference, we can learn that the world is fully capable of being reduced to nothingness and forfeiting its existence. The flood reinforced the principle of Hashem's power to obliterate any part or all of creation.
- Species can propagate only via natural reproduction. Unlike what philosopher Ben Sira espoused, they cannot come into existence by way of the elements somehow agglomerating and forming them. That is precisely what Hashem had in mind when the directive was issued to bring pairs of animals to the ark.
- The Torah's first two *parshiyot* emphasize that a timeframe of years refers to solar years consisting of twelve thirty day months. Noach's sojourn on the ark is a case in point. The calculation of when he entered and exited reflects a system of telling time corroborating this.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And the Almighty spoke to Noach saying…'

Noach's lifespan covered the antediluvian, ark, and post-flood years. After opening the ark's sunlight window, he could see that dry land had become more pronounced daily. Noach stayed put – even after the last puddles of flood waters were wiped away. Only after the Divine instruction to leave had been issued did Noach give permission for the ark inhabitants to file out. Just as entering the ark had followed Hashem's command, so too did exiting. Noach had been the first one to board and was the first one to disembark.

Setting down on *terra firma* that had experienced total upheaval, Noach reflected on his personal lot with wellsprings of gratitude for his personal deliverance and heavenly compassion. Noach offered the choicest animals and birds in sacrifice upon an altar he built. He intuitively understood that circumstances required only the very finest specimens to be proffered as burnt-offerings. Note, when Moshe wrote the Torah and recorded this story, he used the adjective *tahor* as a means of alluding to permitted types of livestock and fowl. But that was not Noach's criterion, per se. Kosher fauna are the finest nature has to offer.

Noach's act was first and foremost one of thanksgiving. The gesture expressed the wholehearted belief that the world and everything in it belonged to the Creator. The sacrifice echoed that sentiment. 'And the Almighty smelled

the satisfying aroma, saying that the earth's curse on account of man had come to an end. Certainly man's inclinations are evil from his outset. I will no longer punish all of the living in such a way as I had done.'

It is a mistake to suggest that the above-referenced verses' juxtaposition give rise to a causal relationship. How preposterous and absurd to posit that a smell given off by a sacrifice could effectuate a binding oath or promise on behalf of the Almighty to refrain from future floods. Rather, the point is that Noach's act had been lovingly accepted. The curse's termination is a distinct idea unconnected to Noach's merit or sacrifice.

What did soften, so to speak, Hashem's punishment? There are two approaches. First, when Hashem saw Noach's earth-fashioned altar and the animal sacrifices offered upon it, Hashem felt compassion for the earth and the animals. When the Torah writes these anthropomorphic words 'the Almighty said in His heart' it refers to noble Divine sentiment and wisdom. Consider that during the flood the earth sustained a mighty, direct and devastating blow. The Sages[13] quantified the depth of the damage – three handbreadths of the planter's plow. Extensive loss had been the animal kingdom's fate, as well. Noach's outpouring of gratitude benefitted both of them. By proxy, so to speak, earth and animal fully participated in the healing process. Divine sentiment uttered assurances that floodwaters would no longer submerge land and animals.

In fact, Divine management now implemented a new practice of dealing with wayward man. Until Noach, punishment was placed in abeyance until the measure of sin piled up to the point where the object of Hashem's wrath imploded in total destruction. This changed fundamentally. After the flood, punishment is meted out before things get out of hand. While this serves to accelerate calamity, it also softens it – a hedge, if you will. It would be as if a mounted thermostat signaled a heating device to turn off, let out the steam. This would prevent the heating element from being burned out and destroyed. Often the Torah employs human language and imagery to illustrate. This is a case in point. People regularly sift through ideas until they come up with a good working plan. The same practice of trial and error, colloquially, is played out in heavenly schemes.

13. *Bereshit Rabbah* 31:7

The Divine counsel concluded that enough was enough. The world had undergone depopulation on account of man's misdeeds. Iniquity had taken root from his earliest conscious thoughts, fantasies and machinations. That was to be expected, after all. Man's dual nature consists of heavy, clumsy, plodding stuff. If Hashem would need to hose down the world every time sin flared up, tsunamis would strike annually, if not monthly. Even if the deluge was deserved and it would be scientifically advanced that inanimate, earthy soil lacks a nerve center to feel its destruction, what would be with the animal kingdom that does feel?

Noach's righteousness led to the building of a sacrificial altar. Pious evocations were the catalysts for realignment and change. The first time Hashem wrought finality via floodwaters would be the last. From Noach onward punishment took the form of smaller, containable yet more regular crises. And to be sure, the new methodology assumes many guises. Sometimes seeding time is blighted; other times harvest. Rain may be withheld from one region or another. Climactic hardship could turn extreme in degrees. Heaven's rod reaches, extends, smites and strikes all of the Maker's adversaries.

Additionally, the Torah writes 'day and night cycles would not again be disrupted.' This promise alluded to other forms of pestilence and plagues that rob man blind in midday. Indeed, these and countless other natural complaints comprise Divine Providence's arsenal. An acknowledgment of man's perverted tendencies is not intended to excuse folly. Rather, the observation teaches that the way and timing of mankind's punishment is altered.

A second approach to this passage views man as a microcosm. His seventy year average lifespan corresponds to the seven days of the universe's creation. The first decade of human development and most of the second one are a time marked by awkward confusion and childish notions. Mature reasoning and logic are absent. With teenage years comes a first experimentation into truer analysis and reason. Adults look back and cringe at puerile pranks.

What rings true for individuals resounds for creation *in toto*. The first thousand years and a major part of the second millennium were an empty vapid human epoch. The Sages[14] termed that period as a moral and ethical vacuum, a gaping black hole. The flood came as a direct consequence. Juvenile delinquency is followed by a deliberate, greater presence of mind that mocks earlier

14. BT *Avodah Zarah* 9a

antics. Resolution and reason promise vigilance. The Torah cloaks this stage in a covenantal guarantee to never again wash the world away. Thus, preservation should not be seen as kindness due to Noach's merits but rather in the context of the general schema of human experience. In *Parashat Bereshit*, for example, the Torah is observing man's bent for wrong warned of devastating destruction.[15] A worthless generation warranted no mercy. Yet after the flood, Hashem's assessment arrived at different conclusions regarding man's shortcomings. In this new calculus, a holocaust would serve no purpose. The mistakes of youth could be shrugged off as impetuosity. Corruption on that type of grand scale would not reoccur. Perhaps the body politic learned to shy away from the abyss and some basic decency lodged in the collective human psyche.

Additional flood dodging came in the form of human diversity as Noach's three sons branched into three progenitors: Shem, Cham, and Yephet. Diversification effectively obviated the consent and unanimity that had contributed to the flood generation's problems. Without global consensus, it seems, matters will never get too out of hand. When a chink breaks the hordes' dint, deviant behavior gets capped. Though harnessing human resources boosts good potential, the early world flood experience had to first drop safety nets for preservation.

Hashem promised that the earth would no longer bear the brunt for man's mischief. This second approach defines "mischief" as juvenile delinquency. With the natural passage of time, that awkward immature stage passed and the floodwaters were forever averted.

A final note on the verse stating 'and Hashem said in His heart' to refrain from planet flooding. Cross-reference is made to *Parashat Bereshit* when a similar anthropomorphic phrase wrote 'and Hashem regretted making man.'[16] The import is that from an *outsider's* observation, the situation was regrettable. Similarly, when Hashem tossed a lifesaver it means from a casual observer's position, the situation objectively called for a remedy. The young adults had grown up, moved on.

During the year and ten days[17] on the ark, natural life was, obviously, suspended. Agricultural activities like plowing and harvesting ceased. Seasons

15. Chapter one, seventh *aliyah*
16. Ibid.
17. See footnote 12 above.

froze. Even day and night cycles stopped. A big, cold, deep fog and funk glossed a hollow planet. Nature's strike would not be repeated.

'Hashem blessed Noach and his sons.' Emotion and deep trauma beset the family's first steps back on dry land. Mourning and bereavement for an entire world was all-encompassing. One emotion competed with their grief – utter fear of the future. Even with a new safety net in position to ward off floods, so many other threats lurked. Life felt precarious and vulnerable beyond belief.

In particular, four areas absorbed them.

- Hurt over the loss of family, friends and neighbors. *All of them.*
- Fear of wild animals and other predators gripped them. When they lived in town and among people, beasts stayed at bay. How would the family venture outside now?
- Normal society practices division of labor, especially for basic commodities like producing and distributing food. Where would those staples come from now? Even had they planted crops and fruit trees immediately, yields do not pop up overnight. The very real prospects of deprivation and starvation stalked them.
- As a compounded outgrowth of their angst, anxiety, and desperation, paranoia crept in. Family members eyed each other suspiciously wondering if Kayin and Hevel's precedent would recur. The law of the jungle, pitting brother against brother, weighed heavily on their unhealed hearts that had been broken by indescribable upheaval.

Staring out over a depopulated world, gnawing thoughts and ghoulish nightmares/reality obsessed and overwhelmed the only remaining family. It unglued them to the core, totally unsettled their tormented souls. Personal demise held out the most promising prospect. Beyond despondence, nothing offered these walking zombies hope. Even spousal comfort and intimacy lacked appeal. The thought of a child conceived in uncertainty and born to despair made no sense. The Sages[18] captured the picture with a mordant quote. When Hashem bid Noach to leave the ark, he balked: "Should I bring more accursed into this world?"

The Almighty beheld the survivors and saw how their past, present, and future braided knots of deep depression. Chagrin impaled and immobilized

18. *Bereshit Rabbah* 34:6

them. But as so often happens in the *Tanach*, Hashem's words to the recipients addressed their existential paralysis and lifted them out of morass. Each verse tenderly salved deep gashes, adroitly stitching wounds. The blessings addressed all four nagging concerns.

- 'Be fruitful and multiply' taught that family can be rebuilt. Close relatives provide the very best kind of human satisfaction and bond.
- Hashem promised that animals will sense 'fear and fright from humans.' Man's size, stature and posture sow intimidation over the animal kingdom. As the Sages[19] put it, a newborn baby strikes fear in animals so that it needs no protection from gnawing pests. Yet a strong, mighty, warrior king who is dead requires safeguard from them. This second blessing also signaled domination over animals.
- Lack of food did not present an issue. For the first time Hashem permitted eating meat. The diet change represented a major departure from all earlier generations who subsisted solely on a vegan's regime. Recall that when Hashem placed Adam in Eden, the Creator permitted a wide, delicious variety of salubrious tasty fruit and herbs.[20] Noach's post-flood circumstances precipitated an extreme rethink. Had Noach's family waited for the crops and fruit, they doubtlessly would have all perished, emaciated. The permission to partake of animal flesh saved the day. But there was a catch. 'Do not eat meat with blood,' the Torah warned. This restricted eating meat to dead animals. Cruelty inflicted on account of eating live animals (for example, lopping off a leg) was outlawed.
- Murder would not be tolerated or exonerated. Divine revenge would visit the aggressor. A clear distinction was drawn. Killing animals for food was acceptable; manslaughter banned. 'Murder is punishable by death.' No perpetrator would get away with a capital crime. Heaven's countless agents patrol around the clock. It also explained the rationale. 'Man is created in the Almighty's image.' Man and beast both possess souls, but radically different ones. Animal souls feel and sense. In addition, man's soul thinks and reasons.

19. BT *Shabbat* 151b
20. Chapter one, second *aliyah*

The fourth *aliyah* concludes with a seemingly superfluous repeat of the command 'to be fruitful and multiply. Swarm throughout the land and be prodigious.' Divine counsel advised against following Kayin and Hevel's example vis-à-vis possible areas of friction. Cramped living quarters crimp necessary personal space and antagonizes. The physical separation of Noach's three sons promoted personal safety. Sibling migration from the parents' home resembles the swarming instincts of fowl and fish to start a new, healthy, individuated life. Competition, jealousy and strife are reduced if not completely eradicated.

Fifth *aliyah*

'And the Almighty said to Noach and to his sons with him: "I hereby establish a covenant with you and your descendants after you."'

Divine succor attempts notwithstanding, these survivors barely felt better. To put it lightly, the typhoon was no trite tragedy. While these verses aimed at lifting up the family, they needed a whole lot more in terms of future assurances. Noach and his sons were deep thinkers and comprehended man's precarious existence. They understood man's inclination for folly. The dilemma for them was not *if* Hashem would extract wide punishment but *when* it would hit. Realizations of that sort brought them back to square one: Why resume normal spousal relationships and bring children into a doomed world?

The Almighty deemed this crisis as one that needed extreme measures. Though Noach's three sons had not reached a lofty enough moral character to receive prophecy, a major dispensation occurred. Working with and through Noach, Hashem's compassion opened lines of communication with them, and they heard it.

The family learned that in addition to safety from vicious attacks of wild beasts and fellow man another promise followed. No more flooding Planet Earth. Humanity and animals would never undergo a catastrophe of that magnitude. Two reasons explain sparing the animals. First, devastation to animals impacts man who derives countless benefits from them. Second, a covenant covered all of the ark's human and non-human passengers. Note that while, technically speaking, the accord was only between man and Hashem, animals certainly gained from the accommodation. But they were not party to it. It would be unbefitting for the Almighty to have an agreement with them.

Hashem tagged 'a Divine sign' to clinch an oral representation between the parties. This does not mean that Noach and sons doubted Hashem, nor should it be interpreted that His promise failed to buoy their spirits. The divine communiqué accomplished wonders. There was no question whatsoever about a flood redo. It was solely Hashem's own righteous initiative that motivated the Divine omen production. 'This is the omen I [Hashem] give to you' referred to the rainbow.

It sounds as if this atmospheric phenomenon came into being at that time. Ancient meteorologists assumed that the dazzling hue spectrums came about in cloudy conditions or when high levels of condensation existed. The verse says that 'the rainbow will be visible in clouds.' It is likely that due to a well-hydrated earth surface since the time of creation, a very weighty earth mist rose in the atmosphere. *Parashat Bereshit* refers to a particular mist that moisturized the planet's topsoil.[21] This vapor was very concentrated, indeed. Clouds formed by a demonstrably coarse wetness assumed an extremely thick, palpable texture. As a result, on cloud-blanketed days no sunrays penetrated. Rainbows were not visible in either the clouds or atmosphere. The refraction and reflection of sunrays that produce pastels were blocked. The post-flood atmospheric pressures changed all that with Hashem's promise of a safer, flood-free world. Sunrays piercing through the clouds made rainbows visible for the first time.

The Sages[22] write that rainbows (along with a short list of other items) were squeezed in to creation just before the first *Shabbat* arrived. It means that the potential had been created but not yet activated. The forces of nature that form rainbows had been prepared. At an appointed time (namely after the flood), the rainbow phenomenon kicked in. Essentially it boiled down to thinner, less dense and watery clouds that allowed sunrays to penetrate the atmosphere.

After this prophecy Noach and his sons looked heavenward and viewed the very first bow of gorgeous colors. It painted '**Second Chance**.' They rejoiced and were relieved when they understood that each colored-ribbon promised a safety belt despite mankind's bent for doing mischief. Arched was the dazzling prism's shape. Taken together with sunrays resembling arrows, a heavenly mural assumed the pose of a mighty sky warrior's array.

21. Chapter one, second *aliyah*
22. Mishnah Avot 5:6

The rainbow is mentioned in three verses. The first refers to Hashem's '[rain] bow I have placed in the cloud.' This alludes to a new, thinned out atmosphere that allowed ultraviolet penetration to earth on cloudy days. It paved the way for a rainbow sign covenant to make its debut. The second verse taught 'and it will be when I form clouds hovering above the land that the rainbow will be seen in the cloud.' On occasion, the hued domes can be observed by people. That is, sometimes meteorological properties enable a rainbow posting and sighting. Condensation, moisture, sunrays, and cloud formation comprise the right mix. Too much of any one element dispels the dazzling, delicate displays.

Even when all of the phenomena successfully produce rainbows, it is a localized event and does not spread out very wide. This has ramifications for humanity. Namely, Hashem conveyed that even if segments of the world err and sin, the problem will be contained. As we will see in *Parashat Vayera*, when Sedom and Amorah's transgressions screamed out for Divine retribution, only that specific region was punished. The neighboring cities were spared.[23] The Sages[24] related that on the merit of certain righteous masters entire generations would be protected and never see a single rainbow.

The third and final verse explained 'that the rainbow placed in the cloud I [Hashem] see in order to remember the eternal covenant.' This expressed a promise that man seeing a rainbow in the clouds is not the crucial thing. The rainbow, like the covenant, is ever present in heaven's high clouds. Human viewing of the colored curve does not impact or impair anything. A Divine promise is a Divine promise – no matter what. From the Almighty's Throne, a magical arch forever glows diamond radiant.

The fifth *aliyah*'s closing remarks to Noach are 'the Almighty said to Noach that this was the sign of the covenant.' Two possibilities give direction to what the remark intended. One, the omen is a binding sign between heaven and earth, Hashem and mankind. The Creator left open-ended a possibility that natural disaster may on occasion destroy segments of the world's population and parts of the planet. But mankind in general and the globe at large would not be totally wiped out. Two, these words were communicated solely to Noach. In contrast to the first Divine message aimed at Noach and

23. Chapter four, second through fourth *aliyot*
24. *Bereshit Rabbah* 35:2

his sons in order to lift them from their deep stupor, this one was for Noach's ears only. Noach's sons, it seems, did not deserve and earn the first communiqué, so henceforth they were out of the prophetic loop. The Divine news filtered down from their righteous father. This was important for accuracy's sake because many of the verses do not explicitly spell out to whom Hashem was speaking. This dispels doubt.

A final point about the Torah's specific attribute of the Almighty in this section is in order. As written in *Parashat Bereshit*,[25] the Creator going by *Elohim* alludes to His omnipotence. Paralleling the creation story's use of the same Name and Divine Attribute, an awesome allusion is that He Who had created the world from nothing now reduced it – virtually to its primordial, inchoate, Day One origins. Significantly, the promise of the rainbow's covenant is carried out by that Name, too. It underscores a fundamental reality that the Almighty One Who created the world holds the key to wreck and destroy it as has been written 'I [Hashem] sow death, revive life; I smite and heal.'[26]

Sixth *aliyah*

'And Noach's sons who left the ark were Shem, Cham and Yephet. And Cham was Canaan's father.'

Since different verses mention Noach's sons in variant orders, lineage discussion among commentators endeavors to ascertain the birth order of Noach's three sons. The verse appearing to be the most authoritative – given its context, position or juxtaposition to other verses – is granted primacy in this determination. The above-quoted verse may very well be presenting the correct order. Minor discrepancies that would make Noach five hundred and ninety nine years old when the flood burst and not six hundred as stated elsewhere, if we are to assume Shem's primogeniture,[27] are not insurmountable. The Torah, on occasion, rounds off numbers for simplicity. Although later in the *parashah* the Torah lists Shem and his descendants after Yephet and Cham, the Torah's wish to highlight Shem, ancestor of Avraham, prompted that arrangement.

A quirky novelty in an ancient history text informs readers that while three sons exited the ark, Noach had a fourth son after the flood. His name was

25. See chapter one, first *aliyah*
26. *Devarim* 32:39
27. See *Rashi* to *Bereshit* 10:21

Ionico, a renowned scholar and inventor. According to that source, he achieved remarkable prophetic powers on matters of major historical import. Moreover, chroniclers report that Ionico traveled to Nimrod, advising him admirably in running world affairs. While the extra-Biblical source makes for a fascinating read, the Torah's integrity cannot be compromised. Jewish tradition makes no mention of a fourth son. Even non-Jewish sources make no mention of Ionico in terms of territorial legacy or descendants. If such a person existed, he probably was one of Noach's descendants, perhaps even the illustrious Eiver. Often grandchildren or great-grandchildren are affectionately called "sons." Eiver dedicated his life to Shem and Noach's traditions and teachings. The Hebrew root of Ionico matches the word "to suckle" (*y-n-k*) as if to intimate that Eiver drank from his righteous ancestor's wells of wisdom.

When the Torah writes that 'Cham was Canaan's father', it foreshadows Cham's youngest son's future birth to provide the background information for the present narrative. Before that disturbing episode, however, a verse teaches that the three sons were about to exponentially populate the world. The point conveys how despite being brothers, they did not dwell together. Congenially, they divided up the planet into three very separate spheres and independent, integral entities.

Ancient cartographers neatly carved and trisected the world. Asia's epicenter beginning in Israel and extending eastward belonged to Shem. The second epicenter, Africa, became Cham's domain; Yephet settled Europe.

Still, while Noach lived, he singlehandedly controlled the entire world. Exercising exclusive, unencumbered rights, as related by the Torah, 'Noach, the man of [all] the land began working it and planted a vineyard.' The pursuit of agriculture gave Noach the appearance of a gentleman farmer and the description may intend to teach students that he excelled greatly and pioneered in the field of enology. (Grapevines had been packed onto the ark.) Another traditional perspective[28] is not as flattering. Perhaps the description of antediluvian Noach as a pure and righteous person was supplanted by a new Noach, a common man of the earth. Did Noach abandon a higher calling for a lower one?

An integrative understanding takes into account that after a year on the ark with only water to drink, planting terraced and lined vineyards may have

28. *Tanchuma* Noach 13

taken priority because he could not stomach water any longer. Besides, wine would gladden if not lighten a holocaust survivor's heart.

The effects of too much wine brought a stain on Noach's family or more accurately on part of it. 'And Cham the father of Canaan saw his father's nakedness.' Reasonably, the story reveals that Canaan as a child was extremely attached to his father Cham. As the youngest son of the family, his father doted on him. On the fateful day when Cham entered Noach's tent, Canaan likely tagged along. Possibly, Canaan exposed his grandfather's nakedness. By not covering Noach, Cham was implicated for his lack of discretion with regards to his father's respect and dignity. Canaan's active participation in degrading his grandfather cannot be escaped. Moreover, after Canaan compromised Noach's honor, he left the tent and joked about it to two of his brothers. On Shem's initiative, he and Yephet entered the tent upon hearing what happened and protected their father's shame and vulnerability. 'And when Noach woke up from the effects of wine' he knew that Canaan had indiscriminately and underhandedly broken codes of honor. An incensed grandfather pronounced 'and said that Canaan is accursed.'

'And Noach knew what his youngest son had done to him.' As discussed, the main culprit had been Canaan who really was Noach's middle son Cham's youngest son. But as occurs in *Tanach*, grandchildren are commonly referred to as children.

Considering the collective punishment of an entire line of descendants, was the curse of Canaan's enslavement to Shem and Yephet excessive or even mildly fair-minded?

Utilizing manifest advantage of Divine inspiration and wisdom, Noach appraised Canaan's situation. He would be better off humbled with less personal liberties and territorial latitude. 'Accursed Canaan will be enslaved to his brothers.' Is this bondage to be taken literally? Probably not. The import is that Canaan's moral turpitude relegated him low in status not much greater than his uncles' indentured slaves. Canaan's punishment was to serve his two uncles Shem and Yephet.

There is a bigger picture at play here. Noach understood that in the future, Hashem would give Israel to Shem and his descendants through Avraham. He also foresaw that Hashem would extend Yephet's descendants' territory. This referred to the Roman Empire. In time, that empire would eventually conquer

and occupy Canaan and the lands eastward associated with Arabia. Moreover, in yet later times, Hashem's reconciliation with his Chosen People would result in the Jews returning to the land after a long exile. In the maelstrom of Shem and Yephet's alternating world conquests, Canaan's descendants were passed over with no opportunity for asserting hegemony in that central spot on the map. In brief, Noach's curse of Canaan amounted to prophetic clarity informing readers that the Land of Israel eternally slipped from Noach's wayward grandson's reach. Noach forever alienated Canaan from the eponymous Holy Land. Ironic.

The great Jewish exile interlude did not tolerate power vacuums. Yephet's occupation of the Land of Canaan began in Roman times and with Hashem's apparent blessing his rule extended far beyond her borders to far-flung corners of the earth. The promise of Semitic return to Israel is assured and guaranteed by the Almighty. '[Yephet's] descendants will dwell in Shem's tents' is an end-of-days pledge. The erstwhile shipwright envisioned mighty military, religious, and political struggles vying for a land earmarked for Shem. Canaan himself will not participate in it for 'Canaan will be [like] a slave to them.' That is, he resembled a landless slave to territory well and far beyond his crimped, shackled stretch.

'And Noach reached nine hundred and fifty years and then died.' Glancing at a time chart corroborates *Tanach*'s creation narrative and sets it on a firm, credible footing. Avraham, as we will see in successive *parshiyot*, inculcated his children to follow in Hashem's ways. Tradition teaches that he saw, visited, and forged a warm relationship with Noach. Noach, of course, knew and conversed with his own father Lemech. Lemech lived to see Adam before the first man passed away.[29] The distance between Avraham, the first to publicly assert belief in creation, and Adam, the first man, was a mere four generations.

Dropping a bit further down the family tree produces the following observation. Namely, Moshe the Lawgiver lived to see Kehat. Kehat's longevity enabled him to see Yaakov and Yaakov knew Avraham his grandfather. Simply put, the belief in creation becomes not a leap of faith but a sure and steady stride of reason. Moshe to Adam is no more of a stretch than any given man knowing of and hearing about his grandfather's grandfather. Historical

29. See chart on page 94 above

accuracy at that brief span is practically unimpeachable and unassailable. Thus, when the Torah painstakingly gives Noach's age at death, it is essentially validating the entire creation episode, a pillar so crucial to the belief in an Eternal Creator.

Another salient point concerns the flood story and its resolution. That is, Hashem promised to refrain from flooding the entire planet. Never again would the world all fall prey to the same sin and hence all incur the same punishment. Noach's three sons contributed to this process when they amicably divided a world into distinct spheres of influence. As progenitors to an entire planet, they literally populated the earth. But even before the brothers' liberal and loose land surveys laying claim to territory began, they thought independently. For example, when Noach drank to the point of intoxication, only Cham and Canaan participated inappropriately. Shem and Yephet distanced themselves from the deleterious effects of inebriation. This illustrated that total sway did not take hold. Individuation brought about healthy separation. The yoke of the pre-flood herd mentality snapped. For now.

The Torah teaches, among other things, important morals. The student should extract lessons from this narrative as well. Canaan's association with wrongdoing alienated him forever from the Holy Land in favor of Avraham. Excessive drinking of wine wrought this. Sober thinking makes one leery of wine's benefits. Wine abuse discredits offenders, rendering wine's benefits a slippery proposition. The model man Adam, despite brimming with incomparable potential, misjudged Eden's food and fruit. Righteous Noach overdid it with wine. More potent warnings cannot be issued.

The verse 'and these are Noach's sons' generations' records Hashem's second attempt with man and civilization. As discussed in *Parashat Bereshit*,[30] Hashem's documentation of the birth and descent of the Jewish Nation began with Adam, the very first man. After Adam, Noach and Avraham provided a critical moral mass to help forge the future Jewish persona and mystique. Developmentally each respectively contributed basic plant vitality (Adam), physical senses (Noach), speech and reason (Avraham). Put differently, mankind after the flood evolved and crystallized from an organic biological state to a sensual and finally rational whole. With Noach, the Jewish matrix took another baby step towards Sinai.

30. Chapter one, sixth *aliyah*

Reviewing Noach's life, ten points depicting his representing a plant-to-animate upgrade emerge.

- Regarding his religious calling the Torah says 'Noach walked with the Almighty.' This teaches that Noach continually gravitated, moving in Hashem's ways. He did not vegetate, resting on his laurels. In contrast, Adam 'was placed in Eden' and should have stayed put there for his own benefit.
- Noach was the chosen and designated survivor. Surrounded by shambling peers, his unique charm and designation sailed on a prayer that crossed and traversed two worlds. A new life order began with him.
- As if sitting in judgment, Noach determined which animals would share his ark. In that way, Noach preserved mankind as well as saving the animal kingdom.
- Adam dwelled on the earth, like an old tree anchoring roots in the ground. Noach escaped to an ark fashioned of gopher wood, deriving life-support from the fauna world. Noach assumed the role of the world's epicenter, surrounded by the world's animals, in a way that paralleled Adam's pivotal placement in a Garden custom-made for him.
- As game warden commissioner, Noach took the liberty of offering animal sacrifices.
- Adam could partake of cognate plant-life. Noach's new diet included animal flesh.
- Divine precept warned him with regards to murder. Adam was restricted from eating the Knowledge fruit, as it too closely approximated Adam's essence. Noach was allowed to kill and consume animal flesh, but was banned from inflicting mortal wounds on his comrades.
- Noach received the Divine promise and covenant of life along with the animal kingdom he rescued.
- Noach fathered three sons as did Adam. Fundamentally, a person's life can be divided into three aspects. Animalistic creature comforts such as eating, drinking and spousal intimacy come first. Next there is a civic or social aspect. The last and loftiest arena is that of personal growth and higher differentiation of self that ponders and unlocks intellectual and emotional intelligence. Cham fixated and got stuck at Level One. His filial failure with Noach glaringly highlighted that assessment. Yephet

is identified with Level Two. His sense of right and decency complemented Shem and together they remedied Cham and Canaan's wrong perpetrated against Noach. Shem attained towering Level Three. The Sages[31] attributed the establishment of the first institution of higher education to him. The academy dedicated itself to spiritual and intellectual pursuits. If Yephet personified esthetics, law, and administrative order, Shem dwelled in ivory academies and heaven-reaching seminaries. The Almighty imbued those hallowed study halls with wisdom, knowledge and discernment. Just as man shares animals' essential anatomical characteristics, Noach's sons provided broad strokes for a full range of the three lifestyles offered to mankind.

A brief digression is in order before we proceed to the final prominent point in Noach's life story. As mentioned above, Noach's three sons fully cooperated when it came to dividing up world territory. The Torah acknowledged personality inclinations. 'And Canaan will serve [his brothers].' Ancient philosophers observed that wise men gravitate towards leadership whereas farm workers seek comfort relinquishing their personal liberty to their leaders. Canaan's name suggests subservience (*hachna'ah*). Lacking driving ambition, he found societal restraints reassuring. Canaan's father Cham's name possibly reflects a hot temperament. Or perhaps the name alludes to swarthy countenance and character traits (*chum*). This sharply contrasts with Yephet's physical and behavioral comeliness (*yofi*). The Torah highly praises Shem, placing him among its most reputable (*shem*) and noble individuals.

As progenitors to an entire world, Noach's three sons passed down for posterity the essentials of their respective constitutions. Note, for example, Cham's descendants like Cush, Mitzrayim, Poot, and Canaan who shared their ancestor's traits. Historically they have, in comparison to certain other cultures, been challenged by liberal sexual attitudes. Those ancient nations, for the most part, did not form enlightened governments or administrations.

Yephet produced Greek and Roman civilizations of note. They fostered progress and advancement in many areas including government, education, arts, and science. Beauty and aesthetics defined their sensibilities.

Shem's descendants like Elam, Ashur, Arpachshad, Lud, and Aram had, in general, made major strides in philosophy and academia. Keen intellectual

31. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:6

curiosity propelled them to delve into natural and supernatural pursuits. The direct lineage from Shem to Eiver to Avraham traces the foundations and continuity of the respected study halls. From Avraham, Yishmael and his other sons (excluding Yitzchak) probed parapsychological phenomena as well as astronomy and astrology. Ancient Egypt eventually excelled and became a repository for occult practices. Black-magic sorcerers deliberately tapped forbidden sources thereby sidestepping the kosher channels chosen by prophets.[32] Esav's descendants introduced a wide variety of intellectual pursuits to the Romans and Greeks. Yephet's descendants are credited with huge pools of talent as a result of Tzepho son of Elifaz, one of history's more colorful personalities discussed in greater length in *Sefer Yeshayahu.*[33] Their contributions to secular studies can hardly be overestimated.

Without desiring to disparage Yephet's monumental accomplishments, an important clarification is in order. Simply put, they pale in comparison to the quality of Shem's descendants' genius. Jewish wisdom reserves a place unto itself. Judaism's tradition has radiated pure light unknown to any culture or civilization. That is because the Almighty opened up prophetic vistas of unprecedented holiness as Moshe testified when the Torah put it this way: 'Verily a wise and discerning People is this great Nation.'[34]

Historians debated if ancient Greece's Golden Age produced original thinkers, orators, and leaders or if their wisdom was borrowed from ancient Israel. That discussion may miss the point. The main thing is that the Torah posits how Noach's three sons are indicative of the human condition – with all of its foibles and heroics. To be sure, these three global patriarchs provided real legacies to their descendants.

It is just as accurate to assert that Shem, Yephet, and Cham got along adequately well and made good neighbors when the time came for them to assert territorial separation, independence, and individuation. No border conflicts. No wars. No hostility. No ugly competition and backstabbing. No family cutoffs. These three brothers – with all of their strengths and weaknesses – managed to get along; they were a functional family. Porous and nominal borders cross-pollinated people, ideas, and commerce. Yet, each son's unique personality passed down crucial and discernible legacies, cutting in rock their respective nations' faces.

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32. See Abravanel's mini-treatise on the subject in his commentary to *Shmot* chapter seven.
33. See Abravanel to *Yeshayahu* 35
34. *Devarim* 4:6

We now return to Noach's life story. His entire being, in a real sense, reverberates through and impacts all successive generations. This cannot be overstated since he had been selected to survive world upheaval and singlehandedly dictated the new order's look. A recreated Adam, Noach's imprint on an entire world's population is fact. The sum of the human condition is beholden to him. If his sons represented man's lifestyles, Noach embodied life itself.

Providence participated to create Noach's three sons, whispered, as it were, their respective names, natures and levels. Understanding Shem, Cham and Yephet holds a key that unlocks mankind's mystery.

The Torah lists Noah's sons and grandsons beginning with Yephet, followed by Cham and concluding with Shem. The lineage is not totally exhaustive as some descendants are skipped. One possibility considers drawing a line of the number of Noach's offspring at seventy, corresponding to the Sages'[35] count of world nations and languages. A straightforward reading of this possibility yields seventy three nations, with the balance of their descendants assimilated within their relatives' territories.

With the exception of Mitzrayim, those mentioned are explicitly associated with a distinct territory by the Torah. Since Jews are altogether familiar with Egypt, no territory is marked for them. All of Mitzrayim's children took up residence in and around the North African country. The prophets[36] refer to Patros – derived from Mitzrayim's son Patrusim – as an Egyptian enclave. Lud and his brothers' land similarly abutted their ancestor's area.

The territorial dispersion of Yephet's Gomer and Yavan was markedly different than that of their brothers, as well as Cham or Shem's sons. That is, they did not remain neighbors. Instead, they fanned out to distant islands where bodies of water separated them. A close reading of the Torah corroborates the point. 'These are the sons of Cham' or 'these are the sons of Shem' is written but not so with Yephet. This underscores that while Shem and Cham's children dwelled in proximity, Yephet's descendants did not. They quickly drifted apart from each other.

Nimrod is singled out among Cham's seed because his story takes an interesting but disturbing turn. Until Nimrod, the practice or concept of domination or hegemony did not occur to anybody. People contented to view

35. *Shabbat* 88b; *Megillah* 13b et al
36. *Yechezkel* 30:13–14; 29:14

themselves as equals, proudly tracing their lineage to the patriarch Noach. Flexing his muscles, Nimrod drove a sharp spike into the family's fabric, and its tapestry tore.

'He began to assert [prowess] over the land.' A king with a police force, Nimrod 'was a brave hunter before the Almighty.' The Sages[37] alluded to his subterfuge that snarled and entrapped unsuspecting peoples. It may be that Nimrod was the big-game hunter world champion and he exhibited his exploits in order to sow fear among men. Whatever the tactics, his reputation waxed legendary. A household icon. When anyone rose atop the heap, a chorus praised that individual 'like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Almighty.' He was the standard, personification and epitome of highness – a king's king. His affected magnanimity and ostentatious gifts to the gods purported to lend him an air of piety and respectability. The king, if you will, doth sacrifice too much. Lastly, Nimrod's domination may have been flaunted by the master building of impregnable towers, ramparts and fortified cities. Babylonia was the seat of government and hub of his fearsome rule. He may have left Bavel to assert himself over Assyria, building the major metropolises of Nineveh and its neighboring cities. The chieftain's headdress got stuffed when he deified himself "Bel," identifying himself with Bavel's very name. By at least one historical account, Nimrod stood giant-sized and received council from Ionico to assume the position of the supreme generalissimo over all of Cham's descendants.

It is not clear if Nimrod's ambition overran him. It is clear that he ruled ruthlessly and relied on subterfuge to control his subjects. In time, folks soured on their leader's irascibility. Some writers ascribed the inspiration for, and innovation of, Bavel's Tower to him. Assuming that, when Hashem confounded languages, Nimrod's reign of terror crumbled. The king and his people did not speak the same language. Literally. His frustration peaked as the tower sagged.

P.S. Nimrod left town and went to Persia where his new, dubious pet project consisted of teaching the locals how to worship fire and the sun.

Moving from Nimrod to Canaan's children, the Torah lists ten of them. Later, Hashem promised Avraham that his progeny would conquer their lands. To avoid confusion it should be noted that in this *parashah*, the names are

37. *Bereshit Rabbah* 37:2

those given by Canaan, their father. However, with the passage of time and the shift of moving populations, their names had changed by Avraham's lifetime.[38]

'And Shem also fathered children. He is the patriarch of Eiver's descendants and Yephet's eldest brother'. The Torah skips several generations of Shem and singles out Eiver and his progeny even though he is a great-grandson. This is likely on account of a special bond, chemistry and relationship these two had – to the virtual exclusion of Shem's other family members. He deeply respected and regarded Eiver's dogged determination and dedication to high academic principles established in the study halls. Shem did not have much to do with Cham and his children either, preferring to associate instead with Yephet on account of his noble bearing. Thus, of all Shem's circle of descendants, Eiver is considered the heir par excellence. Of Shem's brothers – that circle practically squeezed Cham out, leaving Yephet's brotherly bond tight.

To provide a more complete historical overview, the inclusion of the ancient families of nations traced to Noach's three sons can be found in an appendix at the end of this chapter. Note that temporal and mundane activities merit only passing mention in the Torah. (It is important and interesting to trace the development of systems, both administrative and political. But the realm and design of religious pursuit forms, by far, the main thrust of the Torah.) For that reason much has been omitted out of concern that any more written in this volume would be superfluous and serve no value or benefit.

Seventh *aliyah*

'One language was spoken in the world, and things were shared.'

The coming passage encapsulates a recidivistic attitude that forever impacted civilization. And its stubborn allegiance was none for the better. Commentators spanning centuries put their minds to figure out exactly what rankled the generation that built the Tower of Bavel, the planet's first super-engineering feat. In short shrift, Bavel's folly carved and cut the human tongue to bits. What lay behind an event that disrupted dialogue, shut down open communication, and garbled common language forever?

38. See chapter three, sixth *aliyah*

Homiletic interpretations simplify the sin to people's desire to duel the Almighty, as it were, on Hashem's heavenly turf.[39] Taking this at face value would lead us to a ludicrous conclusion that Hashem took such a cockamamie idea seriously, meting out punishment to imbeciles. In light of the verse telling us of Hashem's concern that – barring His intervention – they might actually succeed in whatever their endeavor was, this reading clearly falls under the heading of allegory.

Others recognized the motive to be heresy and religious apostasy.[40] Punishment for that, though, should have been something far more devastating than dialect disorder and dispersion. Here too, the Sages clearly intended to teach messages besides the plain text.

Later exegeses have suggested that the generation built this megastructure as a safe haven readied in case of another flood. Such a suggestion encounters two insurmountable problems. First, Noach heard Hashem's promise to refrain from another devastating world flood. Minimally, he or his sons should have told them that they were wasting their time. Second, the tower was built in a valley! Not exactly a stellar start base for sidestepping a deluge.

Most logically, the generation's transgression and failure echoed that of Adam, Kayin, and their obliterated line of descendants. Recall that the Almighty created man in the Divine image and likeness. He was urged and encouraged to develop rational and sensible priorities. That meant acknowledging and knowing – to the best of his ability – the Infinite One's ways. Creation provided the necessary essentials for achieving that goal. Eden's wholeness, fresh water and ample fruit trees opened up a world of endless opportunity; a worry-free Garden. Adam strayed as a result of disdaining the nature at his fingertips. Instead, he leaned towards artificial superficiality. Rejecting spirituality, Adam gravitated to a system based on a man-centered universe. Shunted from Eden, Adam settled on a sliver of accursed soil. Hoping for luxury, he instead found himself toiling for his daily bread.

Kayin's aspirations were no different than his father's. Contrived values and confused morals fit his farming occupation. Brow to the plow, Kayin could easily have been mistaken for a beast of burden. He marked time by planting season, harvest season, plowing and sowing season again. Hevel

39. BT *Sanhedrin* 109a
40. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:6

understood the big picture better than his brother, choosing his profession carefully. Shepherding lends itself well to quietude that befits contemplation. The patriarchs comprehended that occupation's natural advantages as did the twelve tribes,[41] Moshe,[42] and David.[43]

Noach, despite the vineyard mishap and wine-drinking, was never referred to as a farmer. He was called 'a man of the land' but that underscored his ownership and control of boundless real-estate holdings. In contrast, Kayin's essence revolved around land. Tellingly, he personified and represented the epitome of landlock – with all its trappings. Kayin built the first city, naming it Chanoch after his son. As the Hebrew name implies, Kayin trained and educated (*chinuch*) his children to flock to city life where noisy distraction, clatter, and clangor all but drown out man's inner voice, whisper. Excess led to voracious consumption; envy to swindling; avarice to theft. Progressive, city life wasn't.

And Kayin trained his descendants' will well. Urbanity shaped up and never looked better. The sounds became jazzier, too. Yuval who was Chanoch's grandson's grandson personally saw to that. He developed music and instrumentation to newer, higher levels. Rhythm, music, rumba did not just compete with notions of spirituality, self-refinement, and higher differentiation; the decibels decimated them. Tuval Kayin's smithy occupation dovetailed perfectly. Structures could be built to last longer, grow taller. Conventionality assumed more permanence. Yaval introduced changes in shepherding that detracted from its original pastoral simplicity, quaintness. When Kayin's descendants' outlook and influence dominated Shet's, it ran man into the ground. There was no individual resolve left because discordant values took care of that. Punishment by deluge wiped a slate clean.

After a brief recess, man was at it again. Given that background, Bavel's Tower generation should be seen as refrying Adam and Kayin's hash. The comforts and safety nets that Hashem instituted after the flood (eating meat, the domination of animals etc.) were for the purpose of helping man stand up again, start again. This was misinterpreted and misapplied as mankind abused their leisure. Rather than spending more time gaining wisdom and self-improvement, people sought self-realization via pseudo-sophisticated

41. Chapter nine, second *aliyah* et al
42. *Shmot* 3:1
43. *Shmuel* I 16:11

urbanity. Conventions promoted social integration; attendant hierarchies winked enticingly. Corporate ladders would rise, and man would climb. Refinement, prestige and power translated into chasing money, more money, committing murder and more murder. Brusquely shoving others aside – with a perfectly courteous smile to boot – was de rigueur.

City skylines reached ever higher as if vying for some elusive star. The Tower of Bavel trumped them all and walked away with a dubious trophy. A conventional, muddled philosophy constructed the tower brick by brick. Sprawling higher and higher, it probably felt to those below that these architectural and engineering feats would traipse on clouds, knock knocking on heaven's door.

How the divergent religious and secular goals glared! The glare, however, was a deceptive one because conventionality assumed religious trimmings and garb. Specious philosophies confused all but the most sophisticated thinkers. Perhaps some professors grew long shaggy hair; others coiffured. The point is this: A herd mentality was the rage of the day. Long gone were the days of maverick individualism. Rampant one-upmanship in a sham world of flattering camaraderie took shape. Manicured hands wielded sharp stilettos.

Technology was on a roll. Honest spirituality got dwarfed in the tower's looming and ominous shadows. Abandoning their pastoral principles, folks like moths flocked to city bright lights. Glitzy society built cities and towns wholly dedicated to vanities. Societal rot viewed through this prism wrought Divine punishment – this time in the form of dispersal.

Consulting, as it were, with heavenly facilitators 'Hashem dispersed the hordes to the far ends of the earth.' The Almighty jumbled the nothingness of their hearts and scrambled their languages. Only truth has one tongue. Deceit jabbers aimlessly. The Bavel Tower of Cards collapsed amidst cross-recriminations as man's alliances splintered to form distinct, narrow interest groups. Once close, Noach's family now reeled and knuckled under societies that splurged. Ringleaders emerged with new languages to attract devotees.

Self-reliance tempered with healthy humility towards the One Above would have to be taught from scratch. The punishment by dispersal resembled Adam's forceful removal from the Garden. Both boiled down to the same message: man was barking up the wrong tree. Instead of the Life Tree, folks frequented the Knowledge Tree where the intoxicating fruit canned them.

In Noach's time, Cham and his descendants captured people's imagination and fantasy. Their initiative pushed suave society forward. The son that was supposed to be subservient grabbed power first. Cham's glib leadership held sway over a population in the same way that Kayin had waylaid his peers. Whereas Kayin's descendants brought the floodwaters, Cham's invited dispersal and broken communication.

These two culprits, however, were far from identical. Kayin's reign of terror included violence, looting and wide-scale corruption. Cham's machinations only got as far as laying the groundwork for vice. Punishment by deluge suggested a far graver crime. Cham's crime resembled Adam's and that is why they both received exile.

Cham's restlessness and ambition could not abide by the original global village arrangement where everyone spoke the same language. Big brother intervention orchestrated artificial social interaction which swept aside natural friendships bred in a pastoral existence. Measure for measure, Hashem now erected communication barriers that would rend the social interface asunder. Common language bespeaks affection and shared goals. A plethora of tongues engendered splintered and diverse backgrounds and cultures.

How did the different languages develop? Several hypotheses have been suggested but the following appears compelling. At the outset only one language was spoken by the post-flood generation. Technological advances bred newfangled gizmos, widgets, and whatchamacallits. As this happened, words and images were needed to fill in the blanks. New professions required the frenzied update of lexicons. Nouns, verbs, adjectives and language took on new form and structure. After Kayin's city outlook and slang had died with its adherents in the flood, Noach jettisoned all but simple talk because it reflected his pristine outlook that Hashem chose to preserve. In fact, it was the same language that humbled Adam had learned and communicated with his Creator – Hebrew.

The Tower of Bavel's builders pursued other interests and once the fabric tore apart, dysfunction could not agree to a single alternative language. Seemingly each strand needed its own thread. Within a short time, the confusion compounded as the miles grew. Far-flung and fledgling communities lost interest in Noach's quaint expressions. They could not, if you will, shed their old-country images and accents fast enough. Noach's ark had held the

glue but soon the warm family of origin memories faded and blurred. Cutoffs increased exponentially bringing with it intense alienation. Richer language and words replaced the smiles, hugs, and loving glances of grandparents, aunts and uncles of earlier generations. Social networding, in a manner of speaking, was the rage. Romantic – these languages weren't.

Having presented the evils inherent in collective thinking and society, and moral rectitude's fibrosis brought about by metropolitan luxury lifestyles, one wonders why Hashem did not discourage or prohibit that structure within the Jewish framework. The answer introduces a fundamental mission statement of the Jewish body politic. Conceding that man's Big Apple savoring is ingrained, Hashem did not ban conurbation. The Torah posits that mankind will tend to resist morality and ethical behavior through various means and degrees. Still, authentic Judaism will confrontationally stand in the breach. It will utilize and adopt the world's trappings in measure, sparingly and honorably.

One hears echoes of the Almighty's attitude toward monarchy.[44] Initially wholly disapproving of the idea, once it became clear that regal sovereignty was a done deal, Jews were admonished to follow some rules: he must be of your brethren, with the prophets' imprimatur, along with regulations for the monarch himself.

The desert experience best epitomized the point of civilizations' pitfalls. For forty years, Hashem provided a regimen of rural moderation. Food was limited to manna and quail, drink from fresh water wells. Practical clothing, sandals and the accompanying mystical clouds completed a wholesome experience. Entrance into Canaan changed that. Conventions on Jewish terms, defined by Sinai's six hundred and thirteen Divine precepts and an Oral Law, began to emerge and take shape. If the provided rules were followed, virtually no profession or pursuit was proscribed.

Entertaining the likelihood that the Jewish mission statement grew out of a reaction to the Tower of Bavel's initiatives, it is crucial to dissect, understand, and briefly summarize their milieu. The Sages[45] identified three voices in this frenzied fracas. One endeavored to climb to heaven and stay there, a second group decided to worship idols once they made it up to the firmaments, and

44. See *Shmuel* I 8
45. Attributed to *Mechilta*. See BT *Sanhedrin* 109a

the third would wage war with Hashem. The first sect was scattered, the next got their tongues altered, and the last became demons and liliths.

These three movements can be traced – each in its own way is an anathema to Judaism. The first group studied and charted heavens with an eye towards *imitating* the natural world, helping those celestial beings affecting nature do their thing. People like farmers and healers formed this sect. It was a holistic and harmonious approach to man in regards to his world but it aimed too low. That is, its devotees expended energy and effort copying heaven's apparatus. But Hashem did not make man to emulate celestial clockwork, and, post-creation, His world gets along fine by itself. Of course, man has plenty to contribute to earth and its inhabitants, but copying and bolstering heavenly bodies is not meant to be part of his calculus. Hashem made sure to break up those ideas.

The second group aimed to compete with the natural world. It branched off into manufacturers and industrialists. Producing varied clothing styles, dwelling arrangements, and ship builders, this stratum represented commercial or mercantile interests. They dedicated their lives, by and large, to bottom line profit formulae. Not interested in natural cycles, this caste set out to recreate parallel artificial systems by which to litigate, live, and die. If Hashem castigated and punished the first group's members with dispersion, then this second group's adherents had their language and lines of communication taken away. Varying vernaculars were a foreseeable consequence of technological innovation and its concomitant need for new nouns.

The final category's adherents did not run consistent with nature or even parallel to it. Rather they were proactively and determinedly antagonistic to the natural order of things. Anything nature can do, man can do better. Nature was not to be harnessed nor appreciated. Instead, nature is antithetical to human progress. Since coexistence was deemed undesirable, this mindset destroyed its surroundings. Man vied for supremacy and dominance. This militaristic and abrasive approach towards nature rubbed off with regards to how people related to each other and resulted in brute tyrannical power grabs. Might makes right would describe their devilish credo.

The Sages[46] revealed the Tower's fate. One third of it burnt down. That belonged to the last category. Since they introduced ideals based on physical

46. BT *Sanhedrin* ibid.

domination, their brainchild got destroyed. The second third could not bear the brunt of its massive weight and sunk into the ground. That corresponded to the mercantilists and industrialists who were swallowed by their disrupted communication which brought mutual recriminations and distrust (and vice versa). The final third of the monstrous structure survived. As a result of a value system that abetted nature conducive to spiritual pursuits, there were redeeming features and potential. This group's members faced exile though, because ultimately they confused their priorities and failed to appreciate the Supreme Power responsible for setting up the heavenly apparatus.

These postulations and analyses examining the mindset of Bavel Tower's populace certainly give pause. However, note that the Torah never spells it out explicitly. This provides a stark contrast to the generations punished by flood whose corruption was made crystal clear. Readers would be wise to draw distinctions along these lines. Namely, whereas Hashem wrought total annihilation as a consequence of systematic violent crime, exile occurred on account of skewed philosophic or religious thought, creed and belief that had not yet led to such mayhem.

Additionally, strongly admonishing man to steer clear of the Deluge generation's iniquities makes sense. Every future epoch would witness at least a trickle if not a torrent of interpersonal corruption. Those who succumb would do well to remember their predecessors' soaking comeuppance. By comparison, it is true that the urban sprawl and the big sky tower were a direct outgrowth of a misapplied theory. But there was no turning back. Steering man away from the pursuit of city-life comforts was futile, and alas, the lesson would be lost on posterity.

§§§

With this introduction in hand, the reader can proceed smoothly through the verses that follow. 'One language was spoken in the world, and things were shared.' The verse suggests that mankind from the time of creation until the generation of the tower builders *all* spoke a common language. There had been a type of pure utopian world order where concepts of private ownership and exclusivity did not exist. One for all and all for one typified a system whereby people shared equally and equitably.

Then revolutionary change occurred. An urban urge entered the world arena. And it was a divisive wind. Concomitant with the spatial facts on the

ground came along private ownership. Notions of mine versus yours were conceived, financial feuding born. So were fences. Tellingly, the migration's trek took folks westward. Mount Ararat, where the ark grounded, lay east of the new territories and settlements. The radical movements intentionally distanced themselves from the Garden and their ancestors and, as it were, turned their backs on traditional community and family structure, values. The Sages[47] noted that the multi-nuanced word 'east' in the verse alludes to the Creator as if to underscore Tower folks abandoning spiritual endeavors as a top priority. Methodically, society was swinging from Creator to man-centered universals. The pendulum took direct (and indirect) potshots at ethical monotheism replacing it with hedonism and what would later be called Epicureanism.

Setting its sights on Shinar's expansive flatlands, the mother of all construction behemoths began. The seemingly innocuous verses describing new building materials like brick and clay in lieu of stone really intimate a major mentality switch. In fact, sweeping reforms reached every aspect of man's view of his surroundings. The artificial trumped nature. Jettisoning dwellings of stone was not a zoning ordinance. Fundamentally, it was a psychological one. Who needed natural rock when artificial bricks did the job better? Of course, rock could be found anywhere. Bricks needed industry, ownership, selfishness. This attitude snowballed as the Torah writes 'and they said to one another: "Let's build for ourselves a city with a tower reaching heaven. We will make a name for ourselves."'

Man débuted. Civilization minus nature topped it off. On a clear day the tower could be seen for miles. Bloated hubris rode the elevator, so to speak, up to the sky. Unfettered accomplishment greeted each new dawn, pole vaulting over yesterday's bar.

The Torah explains what the new urban planning advantages allegedly accrued to the city's planners in the words 'lest man be scattered to the ends of the earth.' If pastoral, drifting, nomadic life presented an illness and malady, then urban life provided the antidote. Derrick and scaffold girders anchored folks in place. Agriculture would certainly not cease, but farmers would always have a hometown. Besides, even from their distant fields, the laborers never lost sight of the Bavel Tower. Like a lighthouse, the ziggurat gave off a sense

47. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:7

of security, purpose, and protection. The farmhand laborers would march in lockstep to its "progressive" beat.

'And Hashem descended in order to view the city and the tower built by Adam's children.' Man's comprehension of the Almighty's knowledge is referred to here. In particular, Hashem considered the future ills of communal and close living arrangements.

The urban structure invited Divine scorn and derision. Manmade artificiality masquerading as Divine nature's substitute was utterly unconvincing. It was as if Hashem watched a rerun. Had not Adam also chosen the Knowledge fruit over the Tree of Life?

The Torah summed things up 'behold they were one people and one language.' In theory, had the tower generation clung to sensible and natural guidelines, pursuing presence of mind together with dedication to Hashem's ways would have kept a planet unified. But utopia needed different players and a different era to make it happen. In the meantime, the tower's generation entrenched deeper into the man-centered universe program.

Artificial conventionality drove commercialism and materialism. Hot pursuit of property redefined man's essence. The good life could be marked, surveyed, claimed, bundled and titled. Megacities replaced metropolises. Man thundered: the sky's the limit. Bluster obliterated the upright impulses deep inside of a person where true power lies. Spiritual contemplation spurns excess and luxury because it contents in simplicity. Conspicuous consumption reigned over and repudiated purer ideals. Tumultuous city noises begged for Hashem's intervention.

'Let *us* descend and confound their language.' The subject of the verse is ambiguous, especially if it is Hashem speaking. An earlier verse already mentioned the Almighty descending alone to look around the city and tower. A resolution is that Divine Providence surveyed the situation and scattered the sinners directly because Hashem knows man's heart-crooked designs that cooked up "towering ideas." However when it came to scattering people and disrupting communication lines then ditching the common tongue and adopting diverse languages translated into the decentralization of Divine Providence. Each nation and tongue would be influenced by its own *malach*.

Kulturkampf was at the very heart of the matter. Divine displeasure at the development came as no surprise. But the Almighty's measure for measure

response was a shocker. Humanity, in essence, fatefully decided to throw in its lot with reckless self-reliance. Man's manifesto was duly recorded and declared: accumulated and repeated human experience will triumph; common civilized consciousness conquers all.

While it is true that human experience should pool its resources, knowledge, technology, and the like, still it grossly missed the point. It left the Creator out of the loop and subtracted Him from the calculus. That proved to be a fateful miscalculation. Divine Providence, as it were, lifted anchor and set sail to high heavens. Direct heavenly input and involvement with people became, so to speak, a thing of the past. Instead, Hashem apportioned these errant folks with heavenly underlings to watch over them. Each nation pledged allegiance to its guardian angel. For the very first time in the great human saga, a great wall went up between man and his Maker. The Torah is teaching this idea when it speaks of confounding the original language. Theorizing about philology and a shared language symbolized unity of purpose. Geographical dispersal practically guaranteed petty parochialism, nationalism. Mankind desired walls; heaven doubly reinforced the ramparts. This fundamental and major alignment rift wrought global chilling and greying. Man hardly cared because his inner voice went hoarse, mute. Plans of smart sustainable Garden of Eden growth got filed and dusty.

The fact of heaven's iron curtain truly ushered in a new world order for man. It meant that *all* planet life was assigned some spiritual power to rule it. Lower animals and plant life previously had their respective notches somewhere on the heavenly apparatus system. The Sages[48] put it this way. No single blade of grass grows without its corresponding guardian source's blessing. Even nature's elements like fire and wind's lifeline begins in heaven.[49] Man alone, owing to his Divine image and likeness, was not supposed to be relegated to the indirect forces of heaven. Man in sync with his purpose and design should have forged close, direct, and personal communication with the Almighty. Without that vital dialogue, man dwarfed and shrank in stature.

A new reality dawned. Until now, great individuals who toiled to attain self-realization through Divine guidance had lived on a high, spiritual plateau in a wholesome and purely integrative manner. Greats like Adam, Shem,

48. *Bereshit Rabbah* 10:6
49. *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 3:24

Eiver, Metushelach, Lemech, and Noach mastered an authentic and natural religiosity. They had all spoken the same language. Uncluttered in word and deed, these were the first true pioneers, and exemplar human beings.

After the flood, when Noach's descendants set out west and away from the geography and shadow of those spiritual giants, Hashem carefully observed the newfangled philosophers. And it was pathetic. By Divine decree, punishment struck. Since man's actions rejected the simplicity inherent in speaking one language, the consequence saw to it that dispersion would necessitate multilinguistics. And when the Almighty removed Divine Providence, replacing it with indirect representation, confusion mounted. The verse suggests this alienation with the words 'and let us descend' implying that a changing of the guards, if you will, occurred. Exit Providence and enter heavenly facilitators.

The Tower builders' preoccupation with legislating conventional lies dragged a pall over the truth. Spirituality slipped far away. For posterity, Babylonia became synonymous with babbling. The Sages[50] lamented that when the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile after a mere three generations, the state of Jewish learning was in total shambles. Practically all of Moshe's Torah had been forgotten. Dedicated teachers like Ezra pieced the people back together again.[51] Close to two millennia of current Jewish exile to the western extremities of the map failed to suppress Jewish learning the same way that seventy years of Babylonian exile did. Certainly, Babylonian ignominy wrought this.

Nonetheless, a handful of iconoclasts like Noach, Shem, and Eiver kept the Garden's Life Tree ideal alive. Barely. The light and warmth of Torah truths dimmed on account of disuse. The Age of Deep Freeze chilled Planet Earth into a catatonic state. As morality cozied into deep hibernation a tiny flickering radiance sparkled. The passion and integrity of a pure idealist flickered again. A man born and bred on Babylonian soil started a new-old course of thought and action. Letter by letter, word by word, passage by passage, Avraham rediscovered the ancient Holy Tongue's promise. It fired his imagination, shook his soul.

Parashat Lech Lecha discusses in detail Hashem's promise to Avraham to keep Divine Providence lingering and enduring eternally. To qualify the changing of the guard image, it is crucial to keep in mind the following: When Hashem placed facilitators over nations, one exception prevailed. A chosen

50. BT *Sanhedrin* 109a
51. See *Nechemyah* 13:24

people loyal to the Hebrew-speaking covenant retained direct and open communication lines with Hashem. When the guardian facilitators drew lots, per se, for their earthly wards, one man stood sidelined. The Sages[52] identified beloved Avraham – the lone delegate. And so it was that the Almighty chose him and his descendants as a later verse testifies 'Yaakov is Hashem's portion.'[53]

Jewish lineage within the Torah is easily traced. Beginning with Adam, the father of three sons, the overwhelming majority of the ensuing ten generations were decimated and obliterated. Tenth generation to Adam and lone Deluge survivor, Noach, like Adam, had three sons. Three centuries after the Great Flood, toward the end of Noach's descendant Peleg's[54] life, an identical thinning process came to a pivotal crossroad in Dispersion's guise. Time eroded Hebrew usage and dedication to the ideals that had placed Hashem at the epicenter of man's universe. Tenacious Avraham relentlessly reevaluated society's fabric. He stripped away layers of lies, conventional lies that had permeated civilization's bedrock. The continued repetition of base human consciousness clouded and clipped cosmic truths beyond recognition. Avraham unearthed buried treasures from oblivion. He was, it could be said, the only succulent fruit among all others who represented a membrane-thin peel.

§§§

The *parashah* concludes and relates to Terach's children. The family hailed from Ur Kasdim. The location and meaning of Ur Kasdim is unclear. It most probably was not located in Chaldean territory but in Aram. Perhaps it translates as a vale conquered by Nimrod the Chaldean, or it refers to the furnace that Avraham was cast into by the same despot. More likely is that the name refers to the god of fire worshipped by the local Chaldeans. Charan was another large town in that same district and state. Terach's hometown geographical details are hardly worthy of mention in the Torah. However, it is important to trace how Hashem led Avraham to Canaan's Promised Land. At this juncture, no Divine command had been issued. To be accurate, Terach initiated the trek.

52. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 24
53. *Devarim* 32:9
54. See the appendix at the end of this chapter.

What motivated Terach's move? It seems that Shem's descendants married and began families at the age of thirty. Terach put it off until age seventy – something he always regretted. Additionally, other clan members were far more prolific as the Torah writes that they invariably had sons and daughters. Terach fathered only three sons who were Avram, Nachor and Haran. Further tragedy rocked Terach when his youngest son Haran died shortly after Lot was born. His sudden and untimely death could not have been precipitated by relocation and subsequent illness due to climate change, since he died 'in his birthplace.' Terach attributed the death to bad Ur Kasdim karma. And so he hastily left a town that claimed his son's life.

Probably Nachor's wife Milcah was the daughter of Haran (call him 'A') who was not the same Haran ('B') son of Terach. Haran ('B') only fathered Lot before passing away, whereas Haran ('A') had at least two daughters whose names were Milcah and Yiskah. (The Sages[55] identify Sarai as Haran's (son of Terach) daughter in addition to assuming that Sarai and Yiskah are two names for the same person.)

A final calamity struck Terach after Avram and Nachor took wives. Avram's wife, Sarai, was barren. Terach knew great tragedy because of his two remaining sons, only Nachor produced offspring. Few things anguish man like these that Terach experienced.

It can be reasonably surmised that Avram's *éclat* and religious zeal brought him (and the family) great social pain, loneliness, and ostracism. His isolation caused by constantly battling jeering crowds probably resulted in Avram marrying late in life. His scuffles with local authorities grew in intensity as well. Avram was labeled a rabble-rouser, societal misfit, and heretic. A fair guesstimate assumes that he married Sarai at age forty and left Charan for Israel – with Hashem's prodding – at seventy five. Terach helplessly watched one son pass away and another son unable to father children. He felt that his line faced extinction and chalked up all these accursed occurrences to Ur Kasdim's unlucky stars. In his superstitious mind, Terach saw no solution other than to abandon his home state altogether after Ur Kasdim brought him only misery.

In Babylonia, Canaan's clean and fresh air had a therapeutic reputation – a tonic for body and soul. Terach packed up his family and set off to the

55. BT *Megillah* 14a

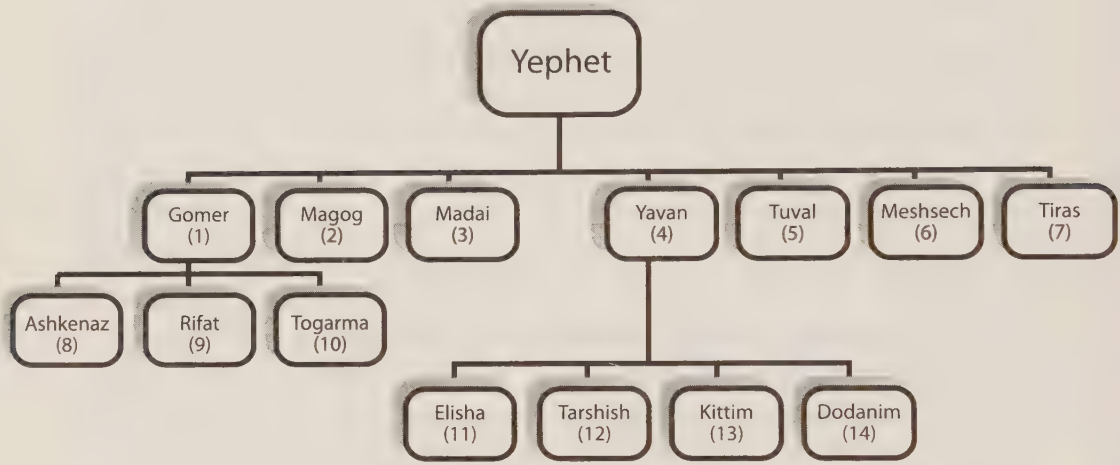
Promised Land, hoping for a good break, a new life with a mountain view. Of course, Terach could not know if his son or daughter-in-law (or both) were sterile. At any rate, there was nothing to lose by moving out of state. Young, orphaned Lot joined the trek because Terach feared that had the toddler stayed back, the bad vibes would snuff out his life, too. In summary, the Torah's describing Terach's hometown and personal misfortunes are significant to the extent that they shed light on the Divine plan. Hashem wanted to nudge beloved Avram towards the beloved Land of Israel.

There is no doubt that when Terach led his family out of Ur Kasdim, they were joined by Nachor despite the textual omission of his name. Nachor is left out of the verse because the trek was not expected to benefit him. He did not share the family's run of bad luck. After departing from Ur Kasdim en route to Canaan, the family arrived in Charan. Once there, Terach had reservations about continuing the long, arduous journey. Staying put seemed like a better idea. Avram, out of filial piety, agreed. At that juncture, Divine communication commanded Avram to take leave of Terach and continue. 'Leave your country, compatriots and father's household' Hashem demanded of Avram.

Puzzling the various pieces together, students note that these episodes are not chronological. The calamities are written from Terach's perspective. Thus the Torah records Haran's death before Avram and Nachor's marriages and Sarai's sterility. The real reason for mentioning this, as stated, is to teach how Hashem's Big Picture plan was brought to fruition. The implication is that had Terach not left Ur Kasdim, budging Avram out of state could have been met with greater resistance. However, when the family already packed up once, keeping with Terach's original plan presented a smaller, albeit still challenging problem for Avram.

'Terach reached two hundred and five years of age and then died in Charan.' Terach's death had nothing whatsoever to do with his decision to stop short of Canaan. A simple calculation reveals the following. That is, he married at seventy. Avram was seventy five when he left Ur Kasdim with the family. Subtracting one hundred and forty five from two hundred and five teaches that Terach lived for sixty years in Charan. Laziness and lack of gumption kept Terach from embarking on his Canaan journey. A Divine precept commanded Avram to leave Terach and Nachor behind.

NATIONS OF YEPHET



(1) Father of the Gomerites, called Galati by the Greeks. Galasia is the tip of Spain (Gibraltar?) or Galicia.

(2) Father or Shiti and Haguti nations. Eventually associated with Italy, France and Spain.

(3) Patriarch of Midias (Medes), land between Persia and Syria

(4) The Greeks. (The Juno (Aegis) Sea derives its name from "Yavan") Their territory covers Asia Minor within Cario and Kolia; corresponding to Turkey.

(5) Father of Spaniards. Their territory encompasses regions of (ironically) Pisa, Italy; France's Seine; and Britain's Liral Rivers. Ultimately their descendants possessed Spain. Hence Spaniards are referred to as 'Sintovalis' meaning "Tuval's troops."

(6) Father of Kapdusia also known as Sisaria
adjacent to Greater Armenia.
The Euphrates River runs through their land.

(7) Father of Tarasia, a cruel people dwelling
in Shitia. The Russian and English claim him
as a patriarch.

(8) The Sharmatia line, called Rego by the Greeks.
Dwelled in Palidia Neotini or Kashari.
The Ashkenazis are Studiskis, sons of
Almania and Hashotia.

(9) Progenitors of Panapalognia Itarvenia,
also Asia Minor. Italians, including Venitians, are
his descendants. Some of their population moved
to France, particularly Franazia and Minor
Brittania.

(10) Later Jewish histories counted ten families or
clans hailing from him. Some from Prigi/Asia
Minor, and others were Turks.

(11) Associated by some sources with Ivaly
next to Italy, perhaps Sicily.

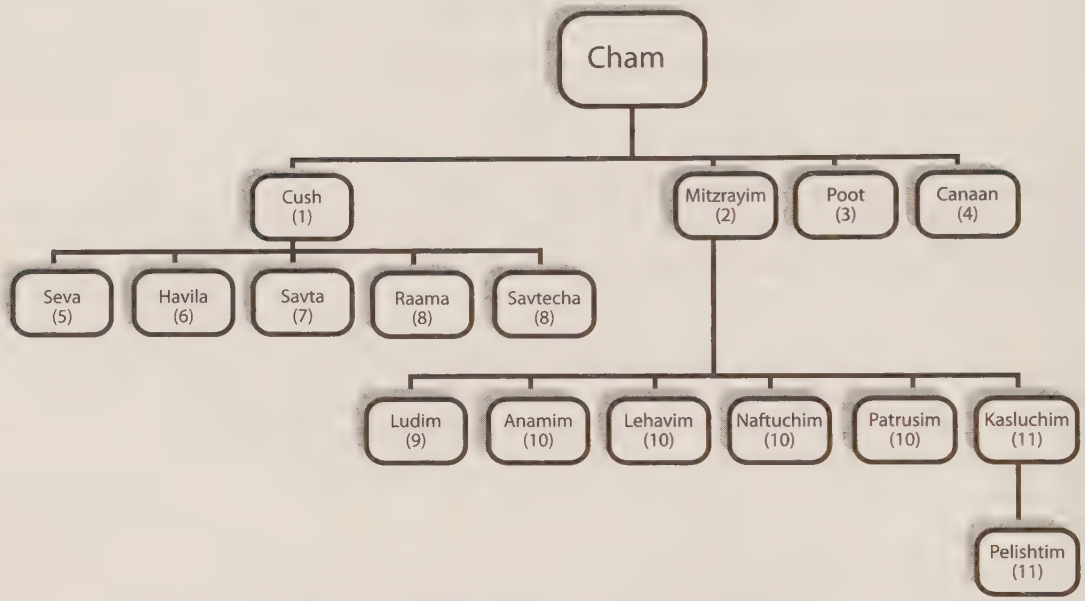
(12) Progenitor of Tarshishis, formerly Schlizis.
Their territory lies between Asia Minor and Shiria.
They settled in Toscana and Lombardia.
They are the Florentines, Milanos and Venitians
as well as others in that region.

(13) Acquired the Island of Sitinia, called Ziphori in
fifteenth century. Progenitors of the Italians and
Romans.

(14) Settled in Isle of Rhodos.

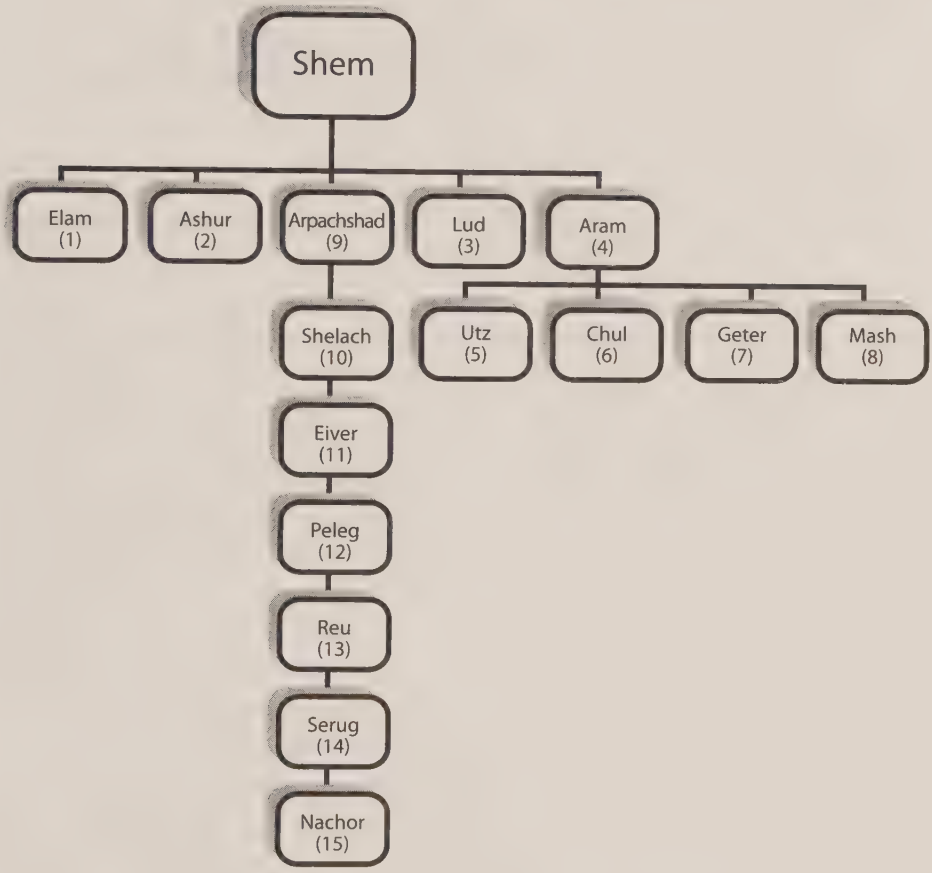
Note: Other histories have Yephet's descendants settled in the Hataro Mountains in Shilizia. They occupied Kilonia from the Nar Ocean in Middle Asia and all of Europe as far as the Oceazi Ocean and Brittania covering a massive 205 regions and 15 languages or dialects.

NATIONS OF CHAM



(1) The black peoples of Ethiopia at the end of Mauritania spreading to the Far East.
(2) Father of the Egyptians.
(3) Associated with Libya, one of Poot's later descendants
(4) The Land of Canaan was their territory before the descendants of Eiver took it over.
(5) Progenitor of Sabis of Arabia.
(6) Father of Gitules of Africa.
(7) Ancestor of Sabitines whom the Greeks called Ashtabre.
(8) Raama and Savtecha began the Sabaim line of Ethiopia.
(9) Lirias of Asia Minor.
Other historians place them in the territory of Moriah.
(10) All of these nations have not had their descendants traced due to their displacement and assimilation by Sanheriv (see BT *Berachot* 28a).
(11) Hailing from Peleshet which is Beshiria in Arabia.

NATIONS OF SHEM



(1) Father of the Persians and the nation called Alaminox.
(2) Of Syria. To avoid involvement or implication with the Tower of *Bavel* they voluntarily exiled themselves.
(3) Father of the Ludim.
(4) Father of Arameans. Their city-state was Damascus.
(5) Founder of Trakuntias. They dwelled in the territory between Philistia and Syria. Home of Biblical Job.
(6) Father of Armenians.
(7) Father of Karamanias.
(8) Progenitor of Lamonis (Note that one historian wrote that these nations settled after the flood, developing numerous

languages in the eastern territories reaching Atena,
spreading over fifteen districts and twenty-two languages.)

(9) Formed the Chaldeans of Chaldea, stretching from Asia to the Arabian plains. The great center of this area is *Bavel.*

(10) One Jewish historian identifies them with the people of Sharmati, corresponding to fifteenth century India.

(11) Father of the Ivrim. Retained ancient Hebrew.

(12) Dwelled in Shittim, partly in Europa of Eterasia, and partly in Asia.

(13) Reu's lifetime witnessed several new political/religious currents that swept over many lands. First, royal infallibility led to the deification of kings. Second, perhaps as a reaction, a parallel popular trend of building houses of worship to their deities, gods and idols began. A third development oversaw Egypt's meteoric rise in power and influence. Finally, a quirky novelty in military warfare was observed. Women warriors called mazonis, hailing from the area of Shitim took to the battlefield. Wildly successful, they conquered most of Asia, spreading out towards Bohemia as well. Linguistically the word mazoni probably is related to the word "amazon" meaning without breasts. Mastectomies were routinely performed because their breasts interfered with their bow and arrow weaponry.

(14) Serug son of Reu lived in an era when the Syrian monarchy became established. Also in Serug's time, the mighty warrior Nimrod died. Nino his son succeeded him. Deep anguish took hold of the new regent. He memorialized his father with images fashioned in his likeness. Homage in the form of prostration to the statue may have helped assuage his pain and anxiety over losing his father, his king, his god. The clay or metal figurine became a sensation of sorts. Alleged and convicted murderers would run and make a mad dash to it. By so doing they received clemency. With time Nimrod's statue was visited by throngs of devotees. It assumed many names like Bel, Baal, Baal Peor and Baal Zevuv. Curiously enough, it was still around in Daniyel's time, roughly fifteen hundred years later.

(15) Nachor son of Serug lived in the time of Shiziani's dynasty whose longevity lasted until Eli the Judge.[56] The dynasty counted twenty five monarchs, spanning eight hundred and seventy two years.

56. *Shmuel* I 1-4

CHAPTER THREE

PARASHAT LECH LECHA

THE REMNANT

First *aliyah*

'And Hashem said to Avram: "Leave your country, compatriots and father's household and go towards the land that I [Hashem] will show you."'

From a *Tanach* perspective, the prior *parshiyot* chronicling two millennia of human progenitors, occupations and begetting are tiny, insignificant specks. Little man's puny ideas, machinations and notions are scarcely worthy of even passing mention in the Torah. As has been stated, a primary undercurrent in the Torah – beginning with the Creation and Flood stories – tracks the origins of the Jewish persona and mystique.

The real gist of the Torah concerns the recognition of, and dedication to, the Creator. But at this early stage, it is important to discuss and learn how a Chosen People came into being. The steps trace a logical, methodical and straightforward path. As has been previously discussed,[1] Adam provided the Jewish Nation's spiritual mystique with the first signs of an Almighty-oriented life, evoking the imagery of a spiritual sapling. Noach further capitalized on human potential, infusing the Jewish collective with a quantum plant-to-animate mutation of the spirit.

What can be culled from the following *parshiyot* charting the first forefather's challenges and successes? What is the right stuff? The Torah succinctly, pithily spells it out. Clearly, Avram unleashed and exemplified human potential in a way heretofore unknown. His achievements soared. Avram's life paints a unique profile of a courageous pioneer daring to stand up for his convictions time and time again. A nation jam-packed with the full

1. Chapter one, sixth *aliyah*; Chapter two, sixth *aliyah*

complement of spiritual intelligence credits its existence to this valiant lead actor. Specifically, ten major life events capture the patriarch's portrait as the personification, if you will, of proper personhood.

It began with a westward journey that distanced Avram from all familiar people and places. Avram's first test was to get away from Charan, Babylonia. Hometowns tend to keep people from breaking old patterns and habits. The perfection of the soul is often predicated upon separation – an imperative first step towards self-discovery and religious growth.

Leadership, self-sacrifice and bravery crowned a considerable military acumen evidenced by his defeat of formidable armies. Symbolically, victory represented much more than field tactics and strategy, admirable as that is. It represented a presence of mind, conviction of spirit.[2]

The first patriarch spurned money, luxuries, and ostentatious materialism. Scorning war spoils, he displayed sensible priorities. Avram's pursuit of transcendetal piety occupied the lion's share of his time. He forged a deep, personal relationship with his Maker. An altar dedicated to Hashem enabled and fostered closeness and dialogue.

Avram fathered two sons with two women (excluding offspring born at the end of his life). Sarai assumed matron stature, Hagar her maidservant. Human duality presupposes opposing impulses and interests. This played out blatantly and along sharp lines in Avram's two sons. Yishmael is identified with banal conventionality and adeptness with humdrum life skills, paralleling the pragmatism of a handmaid. Yitzchak personified the resplendent regality of creative and intellectual curiosity as well as spiritual drive. The Sages[3] observed that basic cognition precedes reason and deductive thinking by thirteen years, just as Yishmael came into the world thirteen years before Yitzchak.

Undergoing circumcision in Avraham's[4] advanced adult years underscored another revolutionary statement: moderation. Cerebral man understands his limits and lives accordingly.

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2. Cf. *Avot* 4:1 – איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו
3. *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 16
4. Avraham, the first patriarch was born to Terach, who had named him Avram. See the seventh aliyah in *parashat Noach*. Also there we read of the first matriarch Sarah who was given the birth name Sarai. Via prophecy, both learned that their names would change permanently to Avraham and Sarah. See the sixth and seventh aliyot in this parasha. In following Abravanel's original commentary, I have remained loyal to his name usage and have switched the patriarch's names according to its place in the patriarchal narrative.

The prophecy in Elonei Mamre foreshadowed events such as future political upheaval (the war of the five kings pitted against the four kings) and Sedom and Amorah's unhinging. Self-realized and fully-differentiated personalities prepare and are able to attune themselves to Divine communication and prophecy. Note that neither Adam nor Noach received a prophetic *vision* apprising them of specific future events. Unquestionably, Avram's prophecy categorized and placed him in a different league altogether. Divine Providence works within a prophetic realm and plane of the beholder. (In practice this is significant even within the lifetimes of prophets whose perspicacity increases concomitant with the clarity and quality of their Divine communiqués.)

Sarah proclaimed and Hashem validated that Yishmael could not participate with Yitzchak in Avraham's spiritual legacy. The Torah is teaching another fundamental. Namely, only through analytical, rational religiosity can eternity be guaranteed. By contrast, those grounded to a narrow human-centered system do not budge beyond mortality.

Binding and offering of Yitzchak set a monumental precedent. Human reason needs to temper ideas and notions, subjecting them ultimately to the Torah and highest reason; that latches man to Hashem's altar.

Avraham's wife choice for Yitzchak: Specifying that the *bascherte* must come from family stock, the match with Rivkah was not an issue of geography. Avraham stressed that the Jewish Mystique needed the nurturing of internal lineage. The Torah posits that general knowledge is but a complementary accessory to what ought to be one's single-minded focus – Torah study. Wedding with foreign academia is essentially a dead-end proposition that will invite frustration and disappointment. Aspiring to grounded otherworldliness – what a wonderful Jewish oxymoron – is a lifelong priority and promise of contentedness. Spiritual souls seek satisfaction and find fulfillment in tying the knot with kindred Torah.

The ten above-referenced traits of Avraham, in brief, help sketch a portrait of the religious persona. Taken in context with Adam's and Noach's accomplishments, Avraham embodied the very best of his illustrious predecessors. Alone, he rose to the helm and carried civilization along with him. An iconoclast, hero and revolutionary, Avraham charted a new human course based on the original Eden values; the Life Tree ethos was his sole passion and pursuit.

Avraham's life's ardor can be departmentalized into three stages:

- Serious and thoughtful aspiration to analyze the soul's religious impulses and curiosity
- Synthesized analysis and adoption of religious behavior and habit
- Personification of prophetic readiness

These three levels are associated with achieving ultimate human potential, capturing the noble, illustrious bearing of Hashem's confidant – the prophet. No pious individual can possibly aspire to anything more or to anything higher for that is the sum total of man.

The three forefathers exemplified the diverse yet cumulative components mentioned above:

- Avraham: Pristine preparedness of the mind
- Yitzchak: Perfect possession of prerequisite knowledge
- Yaakov: The prophetic persona

Avraham personified perfection in the process of conquering man's highest aspirations. His colossal contribution brought great strides to a nation set to produce prophets. Still, the wide chasm dividing heaven and earth is, obviously, a yawning one and bridging it is predicated upon not one but a series of near superhuman steps. The balance of this volume delineates refined prophetic readiness through Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov's tri-patriarchal channeling.

Each of these components has both an eternal abstract aspect, and a practical transient one. The chosen sons (Yitzchak and Yaakov) inherited these timeless facets, and the rejected descendants (Yishmael and Esav) received evanescent elements. Yaakov's sons were also divided across matron versus handmaiden lines, but with a fundamental twist. Bilhah and Zilpah's children gravitated towards the practical aspect of prophecy whereas Rachel and Leah's offspring tended to prophetic theory.

Parashat Vayetze delves deeply into Yaakov's ladder dream and prophecy.[5] Tellingly, it featured Hashem standing over him. The Sages[6] put it aptly with the following metaphor. It is beneath the king's station to appear in the field while it is being plowed, sowed, or tended. The regent graces the event when the last produce has been packaged. Avraham toiled and readied the field (his

5. See chapter seven, first *aliyah*
6. *Tanchuma Miketz* 5

mind); Yitzchak sweated while planting crops (acquiring and synthesizing knowledge); Yaakov belabored and brought in the sheaves (prophetic transcendence); the Almighty King presided over an abundant yield. A tedious winnowing process evolved over nearly two millennia. It is the birth story of a Jewish Nation, a people destined to shed truth's light upon an entire world. Unflagging commitment to the Almighty One became permanently etched on the collective Jewish consciousness.

It would be a travesty to attribute shortcoming to any single one of these three luminaries that transcended their world and milieu's environment to chart new vistas. More accurately, the proper perspective was that before a Mount Sinai moment took place, inordinate, and monumental gradual groundwork must have been accomplished. The fine-tuning of the prophetic personality requires highly enhanced spiritual specialization. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov's grueling personal and leadership struggles promoted a mystical template. Setting their sights ever higher, they hiked. Each patriarch in his own unique way contributed to the end product: Twelve tribes fully capable of meeting personal and national criteria in the face of immense challenges. The twelve sons of Yaakov irrespective of their maternal lineage grew into men of distinction, men of renown. Yisrael's remarkable family took its final form – an engine that drove excellence.

In light of the vivid imagery presented above, it is imperative to stress that the patriarchs were not fictional figures crafted as allegorical vehicles. Their lives were lived, their stories true. The testimony to their transcendence is the sprawling fertile ground for tropology and ethical exegesis their tale provides.

§§§

Turning to Avraham's narrative in greater detail, the Torah teaches that Hashem commanded him to pack up and leave his familiar surroundings behind. Terach's (not Avram's) initiative of leaving Ur Kasdim was explored at the end of *Parashat Noach*. Did Avram need to go away from his homeland for the same reasons?

The Sages[7] teach that King Nimrod threw Avram into a fiery furnace on account of the latter's beliefs and offer details of the patriarch's narrow, miraculous escape. Avram's (and Terach's) departure is attributed to fear of the

7. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13 and Tanna D'vei Eliyahu *Rabbah* 6

local regent venting his wrath on the family. While one commentator[8] balks at accepting the story due to its glaring omission from the Torah's account of Avram's life, a number of factors militate against such blanket rejection. Namely, the story is pervasive in *midrashic* texts. It is alluded to in the Torah[9] and finds verification in ancient history texts.[10]

Credibly accounting for the salient facts leads us to piece the story together as follows. Since Avram's first religious explorations began as a reaction to Aram's religious system, the discussion starts there. What credo was Avram grappling with and ultimately trying to debunk and supplant? According to ancient chronicles, the dominant Aramean sect of that epoch was the Saebeans. They deified the stars and viewed the sun as their god of gods. Popular belief also thought the earth to be an immortal being with no beginning – it had been in eternal existence. Clearly this religious system denied the existence of any other competing authority. The acknowledgment of Hashem was totally remote and foreign.

Born and reared to this mindset, young Avram had taken an early interest in philosophy. A creative, original, and an honest thinker, he sought truth. An expert in astronomy and astrology, Avram plotted and charted the stars' positions. This led him to a different universal theory. He grasped that celestial movements are not inherently powerful forces but rather agents of a greater power and authority. "It cannot be," he reasoned, "that physical bodies in space harbor and disseminate ultimate spheres of influence. There must be an incorporeal energy that grants and dictates the laws of nature, sets planets in motion. Furthermore, that force must be an autonomous power unconnected by time or space to anything and everything else."

Thus a nascent conception of the Almighty One took shape within the young patriarch's scientific mind. And Avram could not keep his find inside. He preached it. Openly and publicly, he debated effectively with other thinkers and theologians. The Sages[11] homiletically wrote that Avraham had a pearl around his neck which would heal the sick. After Avraham's demise, Hashem hung it in the sun's orbit. The import is that Avraham's intellect glowed. Creative proofs of a Life Source were shining examples of his crystal clarity. His mouth

8. *Ibn Ezra* 11:28,31
9. See sixth *aliyah* below
10. See *Moreh Nevuchim* III:29
11. BT *Bava Batra* 16b

was afire with trailblazing paths of monotheistic theory. Sun-servers were offered, if you will, a different kind of dish to ponder. Slowly the common folk began to utter those same salubrious sentiments. A rudimentary belief in the Almighty One hit Main Street. After Avraham's passing, the continuous orbit of the celestial bodies offered constant evidence of the true King of Kings.

Aram buzzed. The old sect's underpinnings cracked. Out went rote faith in the world as eternal. Avram's findings took a bigger step forward. Hashem *created* the world and preceded all creations. Regularly, Avram referred to Hashem as 'the Highest Master (*El elyon*), Creator of heavens and earth (*koneh shamayim vaAretz*).[12] The sectarian leaders did not take kindly to this new outlook or to the rouser espousing it.

The first exponent of ethical monotheism, Avram landed himself in jail for subversion. The authorities hoped to muzzle and silence the renegade. The ploy failed. Too many people had been deeply touched by Avram's sense of honesty, integrity and charisma. From a dank, dark basement cell more light emerged. And it was brighter and louder than ever; Avram's soul was ablaze. The iconoclastic patriarch was a formidable force to be reckoned with as leaders mulled their options, harsher punishments. Burning at the stake was decreed. For a people that worshipped the sun, torture by pyrotechnics fit the egregious crime. The Establishment had spoken.

But truth's call rang louder. Avram's case attracted vociferous followers. A bogus Socratic trumped-up state show trial raised the stakes. The Hashem-centered advocates grew bolder. Avram redoubled his religious arguments from his prison cell and the street mutterings grew rowdy, demanding freedom of speech and the release of their leader. The idolatrous theocrats reassessed their choices as the emphasis switched from a showcase to crisis management. The death by pyre decree was axed.

Only the realm of miracle can explain how Avram managed to escape Ur Kasdim's clutches. Aram's king flinched, blinked. Non-confrontation became the prudent course. Stripped and impecunious, Avram and Sarai were run out of town, banished forever. Later, 'Avram took his wife Sarai, nephew Lot and the chattel acquired in addition to his devotees from Charan.' Charan district is where Avram worked, succeeded, and eventually recouped his prior losses.

12. See fourth and fifth *aliyah* below

Though Ur Kasdim's king signed the patriarch's exile decree, he was not the true powerbroker. Divine Providence guided the king's hand. The verse states 'I am Hashem Who took you out of Ur Kasdim.'[13] Hashem arranged a hasty exile, not Ur Kasdim's king.

Commentators are perturbed that the Torah omits Avram's trial and subsequent miracle escape from mighty Nimrod's fiery grip as the Sages envisaged. One suggestion posits that Avram's motive in challenging Ur Kasdim's conventional wisdom developed out of philosophic conviction. More specifically, it seems that the Bavel Tower debacle occurred when Avram was in his forties. The public tower debate probably challenged his outlook and his universe most profoundly. The crisis got the young patriarch rethinking and reevaluating conventional suppositions. Slowly but methodically, logic drew Avram to recognize the Creator as the exclusive world-moving force and power. The Sages[14] state that Avram was three years old (not in his forties) when he recognized his Creator. Their intent may be that he precociously displayed tendencies toward such aptitude. Alternatively, the Rabbis are exclaiming incredulity that Avram achieved such lofty apprehension prior to the removal of his foreskin. Homiletically, the foreskin (orlah - sealed off - in Hebrew) is referred to as the 'three-year appendage' due to its etymological relationship with the prohibition of consuming produce from a tree within the first three years of its planting. (The prohibited produce is also dubbed orlah - "sealed off" from benefit.) Avram insisted on and fiercely debated his philosophical positions, as is the wont of intellectual thinkers.

This is certainly admirable but is not yet a Torah topic. The Torah elaborates on man's commitment to Divine precept. It is little occupied with man's contemplations and calculus, regardless of their veracity or brilliance. The Torah chronicles prophets' life work, prophecies, and Divine commandments. Avram's spiritual development appears to have occurred in two very distinct stages. The Stage One discovery of Hashem came about through deep, incisive intellectual contemplation; the second and higher level was achieved when Avram reached prophetic status. In other words, Avram's initial Ur Kasdim's phase is markedly different from and inferior to his second stage of prophetic attunement in Israel. The Torah savors and relishes Avram's lifework. But from the Almighty's perspective, the story only gets interesting with His first missive to the forefather.

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13. Sixth *aliyah* below
14. BT *Nedarim* 32a

Readers search in vain for a wisp of Ur Kasdim story details. Two important *Tanach* themes can be gleaned from their obtrusive absence. Firstly, as postulated, *Tanach* traces the *prophetic* thread in mankind. Secondly, *Tanach* makes mention of miracles only to the extent that they were universally recognized as such. Since Nimrod's clemency of Avram could be attributed to a political gambit and expediency, it does not make the grade.

How did Avram arrive at a mystical awareness of the Ineffable One? As written above, [15] Avram's tragic-figure father, Terach, felt he had a good reason to travel to Israel. Avram tagged along. But Terach found new life in Charan pleasing and abandoned his destination: Israel. Avram also settled comfortably in his new home, content to stay at his father's side. Considering Avram's outstanding talent and burgeoning prophecy potential, Hashem had different ideas for this budding patriarch. As long as Avram stayed put, he would not reach those lofty aims because of three roadblock deal-breakers – his country, compatriots, and father's household. First, Avram's Aram address teemed with weird witchcraft and oriental occultists. It was godless ground. Second, Avram's social milieu was pagan. His family, admirers, friends, and neighbors all practiced polytheism. Out of love and concern for Avram, they forbade him to preach his religion. His well-wishers pointed out that Nimrod's pardon was assuredly anomalous to Charan's crusty character. Out of deference to his social circle, Avram would be forced to tone down his proselytizing. Lastly, Avram's immediate family clung to idolatry. Both his father and brother professed it. Filial duty effectively prevented Avram from an open family confrontation or rebuke. Passive exposure to molten-image worship would inevitably erode Avram's attunement to the Almighty's embrace.

These three reasons, then, contributed to Hashem commanding Avram to pack up and leave familiar Aram behind. Hashem did not want this journey to follow Ur Kasdim's model; Avram would go it alone. Despite the emotionally-charged aspect of leaving an aged father, Avram needed to walk away if he was to develop prophetic awareness. Hashem did not want to take a chance that Avram's father and brother would follow Avram and therefore concealed his destination. The verse concludes with a cryptic charge for him to 'go the place where I will show you.'

15. See the end of chapter two

Another *Tanach* proposition is that precious, rare, and tenuous prophecy is limited to the Land of Israel (or outside of Israel if the communication concerns Israel[16]). Avram is a case in point. For his own personal growth and maturation, Israel was *the* place. Like a struggling desert fruit tree transplanted to fertile fields, the first patriarch relocated to prophetically-attuned Canaan. The move enabled Avram and his descendants to scale pious and prophetic heights.

Going west would be rewarding. Hashem promised 'I will make from you a great nation, bless you and raise your stature immensely.' Of course, the proposed blessings were not only materialistic. They ran a whole gamut of heavenly promises. Familiar Aram had held a bright future with prospects for advancement for Avram and logic dictated a *quid pro quo* for his sacrifice. The Divine promise compensated Avram for the lost opportunities in three areas. First, as recompense for requesting Avram to leave his father's household, Hashem guaranteed him children. They alone replace a father's and brother's affection. Second, the Divine promise underwrote material success as a substitute for losing the business connections of his closest friends. Hashem essentially handed Avram financial security and prestige. Lastly, by putting vast miles between Avram and Aram, Hashem kept the iconoclast's enemies at bay. Separating from spiritually depleted Aram should not be cause for second thoughts.

In sum, the verse's promises relieved and calmed the patriarch's concerns. The Almighty entrusted beloved Avram with a mission. Unwavering, the young patriarch never looked back. Destination Israel gave Avram a tremendous morale boost and filled him with fortitude. He brimmed with confidence that on his shoulders sat a most-blessed enterprise. The meeting place where man and Zion intersect would indeed transform the human heart, mind and soul indelibly and forever.

The Rambam's[17] encomium put the first forefather's work as if into a grand maestro's retrospective. Because this avant-garde luminary had endangered his life by openly challenging pagan belief for truth's sake, Divine justice rewarded his efforts proportionally. All three major western civilization religions pay homage to Avraham as their lighthouse and beacon – their patriarch. Providence richly repaid this consummate revolutionary gadfly. Can one man receive a greater tribute?

16. See *Kuzari* II:14 and ff.
17. *Moreh Nevuchim* III:29

Completing an unfolding narrative, a number of tidbits follow:

- Avram and Sarai were joined by their nephew Lot against the patriarch's will. Avram had planned a clean break from his family.
- Avram's departure took place a full sixty years before his father Terach died. Hashem's decree – not Terach's demise – prompted a hasty exit.
- A sizeable contingent accompanied Avram. In apparent recognition of Avram's benevolence, the Torah records that he undertook the full financial support of his nephew and retinue of servants, staff, and students.

Avram followed his instincts to the Holy Land despite a lack of explicit Divine directive pointing him there. Five factors aided him.

- Destination Israel had already been broached. Recall that Terach's original plan was to seek out healthier environs in Canaan for his faltering and frail family. Canaan created and exuded hope.
- Canaan long enjoyed a reputation for attracting wise men and honest thinkers.[18] That appealed to Avram's philosophic bent.
- Geographically, the area fell within Shem's borders. Malki-Tzedek (a.k.a. Shem[19] or one of his descendants) ruled Shalem of Canaan, espousing true faith in the One Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.[20] The king's pure monotheism inspired and encouraged young Avram during his formative years.
- Avram's astrological acumen brought about the realization that the Land of Israel had greater potential for religious growth because it had more direct connectedness to the Creator. Other swathes of the globe are under the influence of celestial routers. The Holy Land was, to borrow the colloquial, wireless. A prophet's haunt.
- Canaan had history. Adam's final resting place in Chevron lent prestige to the area. Presuming Eden was transported to Yerushalayim,[21] that locale lured Avram like a lodestone.

18. Cf. BT *Bava Batra* 158b
19. *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:10
20. See fifth *aliyah* below.
21. See chapter one, fourth *aliyah*

In conclusion, *Eretz Yisrael* was a place apart. It retained pristine Eden ideals. For the patriarch, Israel dovetailed a perfect fit. In a deeper sense, Avram's connectedness to Hashem via prophecy and Israel invoked a persona picking up from where Adam, Shet, Noach and Shem left off. The patriarch was a remnant, a throwback.

Avram made a beeline for Canaan. Unlike Terach who dallied and got mired in Charan, the patriarch kept up a brisk pace until his arrival. Precisely at that time realpolitik reared its head. A military upheaval wreaked havoc, turning Israel into a bloodied battleground. Cham's descendants occupied vast tracts of Shem's territory. Jerusalem remained with loyalist forces. Despite the stressed sentries and trigger-happy troops all too willing to shoot Semites first and ask questions later, Avram entered a warzone and stayed his course unfazed.

Hashem appeared to Avram with a promise and encouragement. Told to look past the dismal current affairs, Hashem informed him that his bright future included descendants and a homeland in Israel. The prophecy foretold that the land's control would yet change hands and that his seed will dominate it as masters. The Canaanite conquest was a necessary step toward subsequently granting the country to a future tiny Semitic clique. Relieved and ecstatic, Avram responded by building a stone altar, and sacrificing to the Almighty. Tellingly, the patriarch's gratitude did not have to do with those two promises. Rather Avram 'built an altar to the Almighty Who *appeared* to him.' A close relationship with the Maker, solidified through prophecy, touched a deep chord with the patriarch. Everything else smacked of the mundane.

This was the first time Avram offered an animal sacrifice as a result of Hashem's communiqué. While Hashem also issued the commandment to leave Charan, it is probable that that transmission arrived with less intensity and intimacy than prophecy. Charan could not have hosted a full-blown prophetic experience, let alone a vision.

Even with this first altar, the Torah does not say that Avram called out to the Almighty as with the second altar east of Beit El. It could be that the war ravages caused by the invading Canaanite troops were conducive neither to convocation, nor to setting up residence. The craggy mountain ranges afforded the monotheists respite from the cruel Canaanite crusaders. In safety and security, Avram called and publicized Hashem's Name to a growing numbers of disciples. Most important and crucial to tracing Avram's rise to

greatness is this: Until now Avram's religiosity stemmed from his towering genius. However, when the patriarch arrived east of Beit El and set up camp, a fundamental change took place. For the first time, Avram proclaimed his experiential connectedness to the Hashem impulse. Prophetic expression tops reason and intellect as the most accurate and reliable foundation of cognitive awareness and knowledge. No longer in need of obsolete Ur Kasdim power-point presentations, Avram in Beit El called out in the Name of Hashem.

Commentators[22] explain the verse's mention of the Beit El/Aye and southern vicinities as connecting the patriarch to Yehoshua's conquest[23] as well as kings David and Shlomoh's *mikdash*.

Avram and Sarai were just getting settled in Israel's heartland when famine struck. The shepherds found it practically impossible to subsist without ample water for their flocks. Avram, Sarai, and Lot drifted south towards Egypt in search of water sources and pasture. Avram justified leaving Israel on the grounds that Hashem's commandment to dwell in Israel did not prohibit leaving the land temporarily for the purposes of commerce and livelihood. Another rationale for heading to Egypt relied upon the Torah axiom demanding preservation of life.[24] Remaining in arid, parched Israel and perishing accomplished nothing. Ultimate Torah value places survival on practically the highest rung. Viewed this way, Avram and Sarai fulfilled Hashem's will by fleeing south.

The Sages[25] add that Hashem inspired Avram to descend to Mitzrayim as a harbinger of the nascent nation's vicissitudes there. Hunger, travail, retribution, and acquired wealth all presaged the Egyptian exile experience. It was not a rose garden *spatzier.*

Actually, the Egyptian sojourn presented a serious predicament for Avram and Sarai. As they approached the border, Avram observed the local population. He noticed that their physical looks paled in comparison to Sarai's striking beauty and regal bearing. Avram understood that Sarai's pulchritude would allure local interest to the point of distraction. He had not and could not have anticipated this.

Morality dictated that if confronted with a choice of compromising Sarai's well-being or adapting to Israel's great dry spell, doubtless Avram would have

22. See *Rashi* to *Bereshit* 12:8–9
23. See *Yehoshua* 8
24. BT *Yoma* 85b based on *Vayikra* 18:5
25. *Bereshit Rabbah* 40:6

stayed put. It was certainly far preferable to accept hunger than to jeopardize Sarai's dignity. Avram had never journeyed to Egypt and did not know that Sarai would be a source of unusual attraction, admiration, and adoration. Sarai's looks passed in Canaan inconspicuously. But the complexion of Egypt's local population was markedly different.

Second *aliyah*

'And it occurred when Avram came to Egypt that the Egyptians noticed the woman's great beauty.'

Avram's plan revealed some of his adaptive and extemporaneous genius in addition to imparting an important moral lesson. The married couple schemed to pass themselves off as siblings. This dubious deal requires a comprehensive analysis. Is it conscionable to pass a wife off as a sister, all but assuring her abduction, kidnapping, and molestation?

The arrangement should not be seen as Avram's self-serving aggrandizement, hoping to be lavished with gifts as the beauty's brother. Such fund solicitation is reserved for society's seediest segments. (Avram's disdain for illegitimate gain is amply attested by the *parashah*'s later account of his declining even fairly won war spoils.)

An analysis of Avram's calculations reveals important morals and ethics under extreme circumstances. Like an army captain assessing crossing troops over a booby-trapped field, finesse was the order of the day. In this battle, though, morals were the patriarch's foot soldiers. Avram, dedicated to a lifetime of practicing *mentschlichkeit,* reviewed the rules of a zero-sum game theory in his mind.

Human dignity's red lines dictated the submission to death when confronted with an alternative of ignominy and shame. In Avram's case that meant, if the Egyptian sentries who forced Sarai from Avram would have asked the couple if they preferred execution to marital infidelity, then Torah morality is clear. The couple must remain chaste and faithful to each other – even upon the pain of death. He comprehended, however, that this would not be a roundtable conference. Avram grasped that if he admitted to being Sarai's husband, the guards would have summarily murdered him. Sarai would have spent the rest of days in Paroah's pleasure harem. Neither individual would have accomplished their aim because Avram would be dead; Sarai Paroah's playmate. Here Avram and Sarai could not opt for a joint execution as visitors do not dictate

agendas. This brought him to a plan that may read distastefully and tawdrily, but actually provided the only hope for an honorable escape. The Torah narrative briefly retold how the Egyptians swallowed the bait. Consequently they bear the brunt for posterity, exposing their moral indecency.

A similar calculation forced Aharon's hand in the Golden Calf incident.[26] His participation in fashioning the calf stemmed from the clear-sighted recognition that being murdered by the riled rabble would not forestall the nation's infidelity.

Another appealing tack offered by one commentary[27] is this. Avram realized that introducing Sarai as his spouse would douse any designs the Egyptian elite might have of obtaining her through legitimate negotiations with her protector. Considering the local leadership confronted with such an obstinate brick wall, Avram could easily find himself floating down the Nile due to a lack of alternative methods of winning Sarai's hand in marriage. Passing her off as his sister would create the false impression that Sarai was to be had – for the right price. Protracted negotiations would buy precious time. In the event of an offer he could not legitimately refuse, the couple would skip town.

One hitch. The king was informed of Sarai's sojourn in Mitzrayim. And one could not draw out negotiations with a king for very long. At all. Sarai's forced removal from Avram, whisked away to Paroah's palace featured ingratiating courtiers keen on currying political favor. Bewitched by the reports of her extraordinary beauty, Paroah would not be concerned with such trifles such as the future consort's pedigree. As with Achashverosh and Esther,[28] he was ready to crown her, bloodlines irrelevant. Victimized, Sarai was utterly humiliated and experienced base fear, disgust and vulnerability. She was taken to one of Paraoh's palaces, awaiting an entourage leading her in full pomp and ceremony to her encounter with a mesmerized monarch.

The next segment of the passage highlights Sarai's righteousness. The verse says that 'He benefited Avram on account of her.' That is, *the Almighty* had *previously* activated and granted Avram great wealth due to Sarai's merits.[29] By the same token and on account of Sarai's fidelity, her oppressors – Paroah

26. *Shmot* 32
27. *Ran*
28. *Esther* 2
29. See BT *Bava Metzia* 59a – 'Blessing is found in a man's home on account of his wife, as it says: "He benefitted Avram on account of her".

and his household – were punished and stricken with illness. Hashem accomplished two antithetical events due to Sarai's piety and by so doing brought Divine Providence to bear. Both reward and punishment had to do with Sarai's righteousness. It must be underscored that Avram, then, took nothing from the king.

Paroah rebuked Avram asking 'why did you do this to me?' The king had two complaints. First was regarding the disease that debilitated him, charging that Avram could have prevented it. Underlying this accusation was that Avram started the problem when he failed to inform Paroah that Sarai was a married woman. Essentially Paroah took the moral high road, insinuating that he was much too enlightened to steal a man's wife. Paroah's gripe concentrated on Avram's dishonesty. The king had no problem, per se, with Avram concealing the pertinent spousal status facts from his courtiers. Avram's fear of being murdered constituted grounds for fabrication. However, Paroah did take issue with Avram for not leveling with him in private. He assumed that Avram should have known that he was not a cold-blooded despotic murderer.

Second, the king objected vehemently to Avram for fudging the facts about Sarai being his sister, telling this to one and all. This practically precluded Paroah from even thinking to ask about the woman's marital status. He took Avram's words at face value, not imagining the truth to be otherwise. He considered Sarai an excellent wife choice reasoning that she was a fitting virgin bride.

Things got even more complicated for palace protocol sticklers. Few things insult kings more than another man marrying a king's former wife. Royal prerogative sets her off limits forever.[30] There seemed to be no way to save face. The public would never understand how the woman Paroah had courted or even expressed interest in courting was suddenly found in the arms of another man. Paroah, indeed, found himself embroiled.

But Paroah finagled a way out. 'Here,' he said to Avram, 'take your wife and go.' The resolution demanded that Avram leave Egypt without delay. Paroah intended to hush up the entire event by running them out of town before people started talking. Avram's response, if any, was not recorded. He apparently had no good explanation for not privately apprising Paroah that Sarai was off limits. Paroah's agents escorted the patriarch, matriarch, and company past the border in order to ensure that no harm befell them.

30. Cf. *Shmuel* II 3:7; *Melachim* I 2:13–25

The primary lesson to be drawn from this tragic tale can be pithily summed up with a piece of Solomonic wisdom – 'The heart of a man bears many a thought, but Almighty counsel shall ever be wrought.'[31] Avram's hope to secure safety and sustenance by leaving Canaan's drought fell flat. Ironically, it clearly demonstrated how rational planning, while desirous, accomplished little. Avram abandoned arid Canaan in hopes for greener Egyptian pastures only to return home humbled. The patriarch hatched a plan to save his wife, but was ultimately stymied by its unforeseen permutations. Divine intervention bailed out the precious and beloved first family from certain disaster. Avram and Sarai's righteousness spared them.

In contradistinction to the Avimelech saga,[32] the Torah does not inform readers that Paroah never touched Sarai. Things had simply never gone nearly as far as all that. Sarai was taken to a palatial waystation, and Paroah along with his household were stricken. They understood the message and acted upon it very quickly.

The verse intends to compliment Lot when it says that 'Avram left Mitzrayim, he, his wife, and Lot accompanying him. They travelled to the south of Israel.' Jewish tradition looks favorably on Lot's early years. Bachelor Lot could have remained comfortably in Egypt until Canaan's dry spell broke but, to his credit, he didn't. Instead, Lot followed Avram as the family and flock traveled northwards, putting Paroah further and further behind. He preferred his uncle's spiritual sustenance to lavish vacuity.

The Torah notes that when Avram departed from Egypt he 'was laden with livestock, silver, and gold.' Avram left Egypt loaded with all material wealth imaginable. His possessions grew exponentially during that brief spell. But for a man who attracted followers wherever he ventured, it is interesting that the pattern did not hold in Egypt. Avram's return to Canaan could therefore follow the identical stops and inns as when he left Canaan. The old accommodations still fit. Finally, Avram while in Egypt did not build an altar nor did he call Hashem's Name. The idolatrous stench and witchcraft practiced there precluded religious growth. Safely back home in Beit El, the patriarch utilized the altar previously built, calling out Hashem's name once again.

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31. *Mishlei* 19:21
32. See chapter four, fourth *aliyah*

Third *aliyah*

'And also for Lot who had travelled with Avram there were abundant flocks, cattle, and tents.'

Lot was loaded because he stuck with Uncle Avram. This *aliyah* describes how, with Heaven prodding things along, Lot wandered away from his spiritual and fiscal lifeline. Divine communication readiness requires the fulfillment of several intertwining factors, and in a word, Lot was a drag. Avram could never achieve prophecy-class closeness to Hashem with Lot saddling him.

Avram and Lot's burgeoning flocks bred territorial tensions. There was not enough meadow land to go around. With Lot's shepherds eyeing Avram's superior grazing area, a full-blown fight between the respective flock tenders broke out. This would certainly be unpleasant for the relatives, albeit perhaps not insurmountable. But another factor dictated that matters had to be resolved quickly. Local Caananites and Perizites could easily catch wind of the scrap, and decide the time was ripe to pillage these Semitic settlers.

Avram gently laid down the facts. Despite their avuncular closeness, the grazing rivalry between the two men's shepherds would likely prove too great to overcome. The very existence of financial discord between them was sure to pour cold water on the relationship, and Cham was chomping at the bit. The entire affair could be amicably resolved by a split. Avram offered Lot the first choice of locale.

Lot should have insisted that he would not separate from his *rebbe*. He would have been wise to defer completely to Avram. At the very least, he should have given his senior Avram the prerogative of staking claims. But the luscious Jordan plains beckoned a feckless and fidgety go-getter.

Lot's mistake and the ensuing consequences of not choosing a life walking in Hashem's ways became apparent soon enough. Had he only taken all of the ramifications into consideration, his lot and fate would have fared better. The misstep cast Lot as an early Biblical tragic figure. The Torah graphically depicts and lays bare his crisis in *Parashat Vayera*.[33]

Avram had presented Lot with the first choice of territory. Lot took Sedom and Amorah; Avram settled in Canaan. Lot edged towards oblivion as he moved within these oasis communities freely. Each locale did irreparable damage to his relationship with his uncle and guide. Ultimately the gap yawned

33. See chapter four, third and fourth *aliyah*

so wide that it appeared as if Avram's influence was lost on his floundering nephew altogether.

Lot found new friends and neighbors quickly and easily. Posthaste he climbed Sedom's social ladder. Avram could not bear to think of Lot's surroundings and milieu that can best be described as the worst of the worst. (Avram's Canaan neighbors were far from pristine.) He shuddered when he considered his nephew's growing alienation and rejection. Avram's last link to his father's family fell apart – a saddening turn of events.

Generally, one of prophecy's requisites is maintaining a healthy, positive outlook. In this instance, it was not so. Avram's melancholy shook him profoundly as if he had watched his own son bolt. Divine consolation came in the form of a prophecy and promise. 'And the Almighty said to Avram after Lot left him' buoyed Avram's spirit. The Land of Israel as far and wide as the eye can see was promised to Avram and his seed forever. The glitzy cities that Lot chose could not compete. Lot was but a guest in his garden; Avram possessed his territory. Further guarantees included the blessing of Avram's descendants 'who will grow populous like the dust of the earth.' Significantly, the message's clarity far surpassed any prophecy that Avram had attained while Lot travelled along with him.

Fourth *aliyah*

'In the days of kings Amrafel of Shinar, Aryoch of Elasar, Kedarlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goyim they attacked kings Berra of Sedom, Birsha of Amorah, Shinav of Admah, Shemever of Tzvoyim, and the king of Bela/Tzoar.'

Characteristically, the Middle East grew restless. Border scuffles, incursions, and invasions increased. Same old, same old. New political maps were drawn while the leadership jockeyed for dominance.

Uncharacteristically, the major players tossed their personal interests aside in order to create two very large opposing camps. The Torah records four kingdoms in one alliance against five in the other. (The name of Tzoar's king is omitted due to that district's diminutive status.) The unwritten

details of the long, protracted warfare concluded with both sides signing armistice agreements in Emek-HaSidim. The accords stipulated, among other points, that a Sedom-led coalition would pay tribute to the Assyrian King Kedarlaomer.

The treaty held for twelve years. In year thirteen (or perhaps throughout thirteen years of revolt), treacherous Sedom balked at the terms and withheld funds. An uneasy non-belligerence frayed, but held. King Kedarlaomer's army engaged and warred against the surrounding countries, emerging victorious. Brash, bruised and battle-weary, the four kings seemed like easy pickings for Sedom and her satellites, squirming under Kedarloamer's boot.

Shifty Sedom, not content with merely withholding funds, fatefully decided to blow peace to bits. She waged all-out offensives against her masters, striking symbolically at Emek-HaSidim where the truce had been concluded years earlier. While the Torah does not typically chronicle military campaigns, in this case it wanted to memorialize Hashem's attribute as the Ultimate Arbiter. A regional war provided an ample stage for the Judge to visit punitive retribution upon the perfidious rebels. The advantage of the offensive failed to translate into a Sedom victory. In fact, they got crushed. The terrain contained mud pools and bitumen pits that allowed both Sedom's and Amorah's kings to hide in those smelly places until Kedarloamer's scouts gave up searching for them. Divine justice not only orchestrated Sedom's defeat but also, so to speak, rubbed their noses in refuse.

After Kedarlaomer's collaborator Amrafel, whom the Sages[34] identified as Nimrod, scored his second victory, the allied forces pillaged and ransacked Sedom and its environs. In the mop-up operations, Lot was purposely hunted down and captured. This was clearly a riposte sending an unmistakable message to Avram that the wounds opened in Shinar/Ur Kasdim had not healed. Lot became the latest prize in this multi-decade feud. Nimrod savored the moment. Avram's nephew was indeed sweet revenge and a perfect trophy to close, if you will, a Sicilian circle.

Nimrod relished his victory prematurely. Avram had been dwelling in Canaan among his three allied chieftains, Mamre, Eshkol and Aner, when he got word of Lot's fate. Though jilted by Lot, Avram's feelings for him were unequivocal. He unhesitatingly drew up rescue plans. Plausibly, he realized

34. BT *Eruvin* 53a

that Lot was but a pawn in a chess match. Nimrod was thumbing his nose at Avram. The patriarch's loyal friends and allies quickly availed themselves as their long-rivalry and hatred stirred against Nimrod. Mamre the Emorite had a score to settle with Nimrod and his cohorts, who had overrun their territory prior to the recent rout of the five kings. In addition to them, 'Avram armed three hundred and eighteen fighting men from within the household ranks, pursuing [the enemy] to [the area of] Dan.'

If there ever was an underdog, this was it. Fighting Nimrod's tried and trained veterans, Avram's forces were positively ragtag. Grit and determination compensated for their numerical disadvantage in two distinct ways. One, daring night fighting hid the fact that Avram was badly outmanned. Two, multi-directional attacks surprised and overwhelmed the enemy armies. Nimrod imagined that phantom opponents lurked everywhere. Avram achieved all of his war objectives, rescuing closely-guarded Lot, the female captives and the war spoils. King Nimrod's forces were thoroughly thrashed, fleeing northward to escape commander Avram's efficient, determined onslaught.

'Sedom's king went out to greet him in Emek Shaveh also known as Emek HaMelech after he routed King Kedarlaomer's forces.' Avram and his war-weary foot soldiers returned from the front to a magnificent Jerusalem victory celebration. Upstanding Jerusalem King-Priest Malki-Tzedek personally greeted them. A mutual blessing, admiration and gift exchange between Avram and Malki-Tzedek graced the event.

Tradition associates Malki-Tzedek of Shalem with Noach's righteous son Shem – Guardian of Jerusalem. Note his description '*Kohen* to the Most High One.' Shem's greatness equaled his illustrious father Noach's piety.[35] The ultimate achievement of prophecy, however, eluded him. His blessing to Avram reflected the patriarch's spiritual successes and dissemination of Hashem's truth. Indeed, Shem appreciated retrograde Avram's rediscovery and publication of the world's *ex nihilo* creation premise. The two men had the highest mutual regard. When Jerusalem's king greeted the homebound troops with sumptuous repast, Avram repaid the favor by tithing the war spoils and gifting it to the pious king-priest.

35. *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:10

Fifth *aliyah*

'And Sedom's king said to Avram "give me the [rescued] hostages and take the [recaptured] booty."'

Sedom's king alone amongst the quintet of Jordan Plain regents took part in the great celebration. Avram's interest in Lot gave the sovereign some hope that he could strike a chord of friendship and reap the ensuing benefits. Originally the exuberant king lacked the nerve to ask *anything* from Avram since accepted practice dictated the winner take all. However, when benevolent Avram 'tithed the booty to Malki-Tzedek,' Sedom's king reconsidered established war conventions and asked for his captives back. The king reasoned that Avram did not need human chattel and expressed his concern that if the towns did not repopulate, fields would lie fallow, wasted. The other spoils belonged, undisputedly, to the brave fighting corps. Sedom's king certainly meant to include Amorah's people and possessions in this arrangement as well.

'And Avram said to the king of Sedom: "I have lifted my hand to the Almighty…that I will take nothing from a thread even to a shoelace. Will you not (eventually) say, 'I enriched Avram'?"' Why was the patriarch so adamant? Was this chattel not his to keep fair and square? Moreover, if the patriarch desired to deprive himself of booty out of answering to a Higher Authority, was it right to deny kosher *gelt* to his comrades-in-arms?

Avram's response in refusing Sedom's offer is telling. In classic Torah style, the patriarch imparted a major lesson for the ages despite it being clothed in nondescript, passing dialogue.

Perhaps only one thing challenges a man's mettle more than the battlefield where cunning, bravery, terror, confusion, and deprivation all meet. That is, how do victorious homecoming commanders and fighters handle the heaped praise, stardom, attention and adoration? Fame and wealth throw themselves at the generalissimo. No one and nothing is refused or denied him. Not surprisingly, then, Avram was deservedly offered all the war booty by Sedom's king.

Avram exemplified ennobled integrity. Personal aggrandizement was more than unsought; to his thinking, it was repugnant and deplorable. Avram recoiled from Sedom's offer of keeping the pillage and spoils. Gifts are to be exchanged only by those fitting to mutually give and receive. A corollary is also true. That is, for Avram it was totally inappropriate to exchange presents with

those who are not likeminded. By refusing to accept Sedom's offer, Avram's tact and graciousness intimated a fundamental truth to this moral midget of a monarch. They were not peers or equals. The prospects of the Sodomite sovereign ever prattling that he had some hand in Avram's affluence made the sensitive *tzaddik* cringe.

Avram made it clear that he did not wage war for fame or wealth or sport. The war was fought to free Lot. Except for what was coming to his courageous and dedicated fighting men, Avram waived all personal gain. With regards to Avram's war-spoils calculation, the "pie" representing all the fair value of the loot ought to have been divvied up four ways: a) one fourth for commander Avram; b) one fourth for Avram's servants (that portion also goes to Avram as slave owner); c) one fourth for Avram's hired hands and d) one fourth for allies Aner, Eshkol and Mamre in their capacity as non-combatants for they had stayed behind the lines. (Significantly the patriarch's response to Sedom vis-à-vis an equal share for non-combatant functionaries was codified centuries later by King David.[36])

Avram told Sedom's king that he refused his twenty five percent (a). The second twenty five percent (b) was also waived. Avram did, however, charge Sedom for the out-of-pocket expenses of this segment. He had no right and did not deprive the twenty five percent that belonged to his employees (c). Finally, Avram insisted that Sedom pay his allies (d) twenty five percent. He essentially gave Sedom a fifty percent rebate or discount.

When the dust settled over the decades' long episode of offensives and counter-offensives, three main points emerge:

- Sedom's humiliating defeat on the warfront resulted from a breach of faith and treaty. Divine arbitration judged and found him and his allies guilty, worthy of a military pummeling.
- Avram's exemplary character traits shine through the entire episode. His dedication to ideals solely motivated his offensive to rescue Lot. Courageously, he disregarded the inherent military risks, scrambling to outmaneuver a better-trained and larger fighting force. Avram displayed family loyalty despite Lot doing his utmost to make it a one-way street. Avram's refusal of half of the spoils highlighted the patriarch's benevolence and magnanimity.

36. See *Shmuel* I 30:24,25

- The Sages[37] uncovered a deeper layer of significance well beyond the isolated event. The four kings that Avram routed correspond to the four empires throughout Jewish history that have heartlessly and sadistically killed, raped, maimed, enslaved, degraded, and plundered Jews. These four are positively identified as the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman/Christian/Muslim Empires. Divine promise guaranteed that just as Avram emerged victorious despite stupendous odds, so too his descendants would hold out and live to witness the decimation of those superpowers.[38] All Jewish national treasures, including the *mikdash* artifacts that these four empires methodically and systematically pillaged and concealed will be returned to their rightful owners.
- The Sages[39] laid down a major principle in respect to Avram's story as well as many other narratives in *Bereshit*. Namely, the patriarchs were acutely aware of their respective monumental undertaking in forging a quintessential religious mystique. As such they intently infused selfless heroism with stamina that etched and lodged eternal within the Jewish persona.

§§§

Victory celebrations and account ledgers closed, life resumed. But it assumed a different rhythm. Shifting winds invaded the patriarch's tranquil tent. The aftermath of Avram's victory began to weigh heavily on him, allowing little respite. He planned for the next round of fighting, assuming it would not be far off. Proud, self-respecting kings prioritize avenging personal and national honor. As if overnight, Avram's understated profile swelled. His inconspicuous truth-seeking wandering style changed drastically. For the first time, he needed round the clock guard-duty and vigilance. Watchtowers and sentry stations replaced lightweight and airy tents. Instead of spontaneous excursions into midnight meditation and prayer, Avram's vulnerability now demanded manpower, logistics, and schedules. The constant threat of the sword shadowed and stalked the patriarch and prophet. It radically altered and hampered attaining unpredictable mystical moments.

37. *Bereshit Rabbah* 42:2
38. See Abravanel's introduction to *Yechezkel* (pg. 438).
39. Ibid. 40:6

Avram's troubles did not stop there. When the lurid headlines blared from dissolute Sedom, the patriarch second-guessed his earlier judgment to return the war booty to those epicurean narcissistic fiefdom perverts. Might Avram be held accountable for contributing to Sedom's fiscal rebound and stability? Surely those assets would have gone to better use in paying Avram's bodyguards, he mused.

The potential threat of war with the avenging kings and self-doubt with regards to Sedom's spoils haunted the patriarch. Relief appeared in a flurry of Divine visions culminating in a prophetic dream. 'In a vision the Almighty calmed Avram's anxiety. "I, Hashem, will protect you for your reward is great."' In the first vision – two promises: protection for the patriarch and great wealth. It assuaged the doubts Avram had regarding the gift to Sedom's king. After all, the Torah inculcated, when the King of Kings provides sustenance then holding on to mortal man's puny enrichments is disgraceful.

Commentators have developed esoteric theories in their attempts to better understand the elusive and dynamic nature of Divine vision and prophecy. This second prophecy to Avram is particularly intricate and problematic because it has (at least) two separate components and levels. As mentioned above, Avram's fundamental adjustment to his daily lifestyle grew increasingly complex. The first Divine communication – almost a preface – smoothed over two weighty matters (security and wealth). However, Avram's more existential concerns now needed sorting. The patriarch's reticence and humility vis-à-vis the Creator served to back him off from a direct dialogue with Hashem on that which pained his heart. When, however, the difficult discussion did take place it resulted in one of the most striking sublime messages ever uttered to mankind.

The fascinating prophetic passage intersects and crisscrosses the end of the fifth *aliyah* with the beginning of the sixth one. 'And Avram said "Hashem Almighty. How can Hashem [make good on the populous descendants promise] and give me [Canaan] considering my childlessness?"' Often it happens that a reticent person asks something of a superior and overstates discretion. The resulting ambiguity requires the unassuming person to rephrase the request a second time with increasing force. A good example of this of occurred in *Parashat Matot*[40] when the tribes of Reuven and Gad asked Moshe for land

40. See *Bamidbar* 32

on the Jordan River's eastern bank. Moshe utilized a seeming ambiguity to feign lack of comprehension. This elicited a clearer, better rephrasing which was subsequently subject to rebuke.

Here, Hashem promised descendants numerous enough to populate and occupy the Holy Land as an inheritance. Too gingerly Avram asked: 'But yet am I childless.' Hashem added 'your reward is great.' Avram replied: 'What good is wealth? Shall my trusted servant Eliezer inherit it?' Hashem, in effect, said: 'Do not worry.' To this Avram said: 'Still am I barren.' The patriarch meant that shepherding requires much attention and he had no children with whom to share this great burden. Eliezer served as the estate overseer and could not pasture the flocks. His responsibilities had kept him close to the homestead. At this point Avram dropped a first hint. 'I am barren.' That is, if I only had children, then there would be no predicament. Finally the main point began slowly surfacing. Anguished and as if under his breath Avram released some of his broken heart's gnawing if only with the utmost reluctance. *If only I had children…*

Silently still, the patriarch waited. Would Hashem respond to the purposely muffled plea that screamed, cried with decades-long trains of tears? Silently spilling so that no man ever heard a whisper of complaint, sullen midnight tears buried deep each morning in the patriarch's breast.

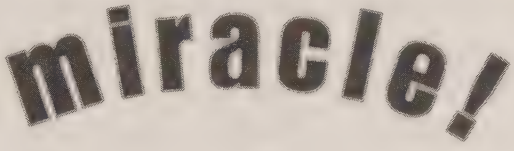
The Almighty's quiet elicited more words from Avram. Did the Sages[41] not teach that the Holy One blessed be He greatly desires the righteous to enunciate prayer? Instinctively, Avram knew that he had to speak up again, this time louder, more forcefully. 'And Avram said: "But still You [Hashem] have not given me children."' This was not intended as a swipe. He meant that since Hashem alluded to descendants, the normal time for childbearing is during a man's vibrant youth. Confused, Avram wondered what purpose children would be served as a lifetime neared an advanced age. Again Avram questioned the benefit of the Divine promise for fabulous wealth. It just meant more money for trustee Eliezer to virtually inherit because a miracle child born today would be too young to take actual possession.

To Avram's clearer words this second time, Hashem quickly answered. Immediately 'the word of Hashem came to him [Avram] saying: "That one [Eliezer] will not inherit from you."' The Almighty promised that Avram would father a son before he died. Well before. That son would already be a

41. BT *Yevamot* 64a

grown, mature man at the time and would not need a guardian's assistance. A Divine promise of hope supplanted a lifetime of barren anxiety, despair and frustration.

Why did the heavenly plan need to play out this way? Why did Avram and Sarai have to experience parenthood so exaggeratedly late in life? Perhaps one explanation is that had they given birth to Yitzchak in the normal bearing years they would have taken the miracle for granted, attributing it to nature running its course. With weakened and newly circumcised Avraham at a hundred and post menopausal Sarah at ninety, there could be no mistaking it; from every possible angle this event flashed:



Undisputedly, people far and wide all attested that Divine Providence and compassion ushered this baby into the world. Unmistakably, the supernatural character of Yitzchak's birth surrounded, defined, and marked the event.

'He took him out. He said to him: "Look up at heaven and count the stars if you can." Then He [Hashem] said, "This many will be your descendants."' Three approaches are presented here to explain what the Torah intended to convey in the verse's verb "to take out" or "remove." One, Hashem intended the words to teach that Avraham's child will *oust* Eliezer, removing him as virtual heir. Separately, Avram was told to look heavenward as a sign of his prodigious offspring. Two, Hashem desired to *eliminate* the notion of Eliezer inheriting. Once Avram's gnawing thought had been neutralized, he had room to believe that he would father a child-heir. This approach stressed the casting outside as helping the forefather arrive at a different emotional or intellectual – as opposed to physical – place. Third, the Torah narrative distinguishes prophetic levels of Divine communication. That is, originally Avram received the heavenly promise of children via vision. Hashem concurrently informed Avram that Eliezer would not inherit. At that point, the prophecy broke off and the patriarch awoke.

The heavenly instruction led Avram *out* of the tent where a vision occurred. Now awake and outside in a field, Avram experienced a second, more intense prophetic impulse that began with a request to look heavenward. This

outdoor location was crucial to the third Divine communication known as the severed-animal sacrificial covenant (*brit bein habetarim*).

A cursory reading of the verse implies that Avram now 'believed in Hashem' and that was considered a righteous gesture, act or realization. But in truth Avram's faith did not begin now out in that night's cold grove. The Torah is cautioning students not to be led astray by the aforementioned dialogue, and thus left with the impression that Avram asked for children because he doubted Hashem's earlier promise. Avram had *already* believed in Hashem for quite some time and placed his full trust and confidence in His promise upon its issuance. Avram now beseeched the Almighty to *hasten* the promise and not make him wait until his very last days. Furthermore, the verse reads that Avram viewed the promise not as a Divine act of compassion but instead he saw it as a just (*tzedakah*) and appropriate reward, as well as a fulfillment of Hashem's prior promise 'go and I [Hashem] will make your nation populous.'

The verse about belief in Hashem could also be read in future tense. If so, Hashem is saying that Avram's *descendants* – the future Jewish Nation – would believe in Hashem and follow in the Almighty's ways. Hashem desired to convey certain things at once to Avram with this single heavenward glance. The Creator wanted Avram to observe a starry, starry night sky and contemplate its significance and implication. Additionally, Avram was commanded to make an impossible attempt at counting the stars. The Divine promise told the patriarch that his future descendants would resemble a sparkling diamond galaxy in six ways:

- Heavenly spheres depict and stud a brilliant universe. Shining stars evoke awe, grandeur. Avram's descendants, too, glitter conspicuously in a massive planet. Reference pointed to the prophets and pious people, resplendent with pure insight and altruistic deed.
- The sheer quantity of the stars foretold a nation whose count defies numbers. While kings Shaul[42] and David[43] did count the Israelites, they only numbered the troops. A national census had never been commissioned. (Ancient astronomers tabulated a total of one thousand and twenty-two stars. However that took into account only those visible with primitive telescopes.)

42. *Shmuel* I 11:8; 14:4
43. *Shmuel* II 24

- The stars' orbits or movements are not self-propelled; they are subject to direct Divine administration. Later philosophers discussed Hashem's role in the celestial systems that apparently are consistent with Torah thinking.[44] Jews resemble stars in that their actions are guided by Torah precepts and tradition. In *Parashat Vayeshev,* Yosef's dream depicts Yaakov and the brothers as the sun, moon, and stars.[45]
- Magnificent galaxies attest to the Creator's awesomeness, heralding praise for the wondrous delight it brings. The Jewish Nation alone, among all of the nations, praise the Almighty One in unison, accord. Non-Jews do not merit this. The evil and foolish fritter away their lives and abuse themselves. No praise there. Jewish soul and praise ring eternal for Hashem.
- The stars' orbits revolve elliptically. At any given position some celestial bodies are visible, others not. Aptly, the Jewish Nation attains sublime transcendence in accord with the Maker's will, at other times it will sink well below the horizon. Brightest bright or darkest dinge – that too marks an Eternal Nation.
- Neither the celestial bodies' orbit nor the Jewish Nation's mission is mortal. From the time of their respective existences, they are permanent fixtures in Hashem's Grand Design. (The Rambam[46] has discussed the topic of eternity developing out of finite creations.) No nation, no united family of nations, no exile, no enslavement nor *shoah* can possibly alter the fact; Jews are and will always be forever and ever.

Taken thematically, the six points of the star simile lend themselves to a brief summary. Namely, the first two traits portray a Jewish likeness to the stars in quality and quantity. The two intermediate traits underscore the nation as devoted to following in Hashem's paths. Finally the third set described the people's eternal existence with peaks and valleys. Hashem said to Avram that 'He considered it with righteousness.' That is, Hashem promised the patriarch that his future descendants would be guided with Divine Providence in righteousness. Reward or punishment – will be in strict keeping with their deeds. All acts will be considered accordingly.

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44. (See *Moreh Nevuchim* I:70 and Abravanel's treatise *Ateret Zekenim* 12 for a fuller treatment.)
45. Chapter nine, first *aliyah*
46. *Moreh Nevuchim* II:27

Sixth *aliyah*

'And He [Hashem] said to him [Avram]: "I am the Almighty Who brought you out from Ur Kasdim in order to give you this land to inherit."'

Thus far in Hashem's communications, Avram secured several wonderful tidings that quieted much existential unrest. Divine protection from enemies, great material reward, the rightful title to Israel, prodigious descendants and the removal of Eliezer as the default heir head the list of promises. With all these positive messages heralding a bright future, this *aliyah*'s opening line appears out of place. Why does the verse relate to Hashem as Avram's Ur Kasdim savior? The miracle, though significant, throws readers back to yesteryear. Of course Hashem brought him out from Ur Kasdim, but in light of everything that transpired since that time, why bring it up now?

Avram was subject to a precarious personal security situation on account of his military victory. Canaan exposed that sense of isolation and vulnerability. Legitimately he wondered of what practical value children would be if he were mangled – even if not murdered – by marauding enemies. Avram needed filial duty's defense forthwith. The Torah writes 'I [Hashem] brought you out of Ur Kasdim' to further calm Avram. That is, since the Ur Kasdim Guardian had shown that He protected the patriarch, there is no need for children to fulfill that particular need. Avram's back was covered.

Regarding the possession of Canaan, Avram asked 'how will I know that I will inherit it?' The Divine promise had been made several times prior so the question surely did not mean to ask for a heavenly sign, omen, or covenant. Due to conflicting prophecies on the matter, Avram desired to know which specific line of direct descendant would merit the Holy Land. His son or grandson? The third, fourth, or hundredth generation? Perhaps Avram would personally lead the liberation troops. Avram wanted to know if his victory over Kedarlaomer's armies presaged a heavenly nod to resume fighting.

Hashem proceeded to answer the question by enjoining the patriarch to participate in a psychodrama. Namely, Hashem requested the patriarch to bring a calf, goat and ram trio, a pigeon and a turtledove. What did this motley menagerie represent? Two suggestions give guidance. Firstly, the calf, goat and ram symbolized a tripartite patriarchal coterie of Avram, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. These domesticated, kosher herds correspond to the prestigious

progenitors whereby Avraham – bull,[47] Yitzchak–ram[48] and Yaakov – goat.[49] How fitting that the patriarchs are likened to the most common, prolific kosher herd and flock. Both should propagate profusely and fill vast regions with stock. As an aside, careful students note that the sequence is out of order (Yaakov's goat precedes Yitzchak's ram). On occasion *Tanach* style does scramble the order.

'He [Avram] took all of them and split them down the middle. He placed the severed parts opposite each other. But the fowl was not split.' This act intimated that none of the three patriarchs would inherit the land in their lifetimes. The remaining, live birds suggested Moshe and Yehoshua conquering the Jordan River's east and west banks respectively.

Completing the prophecy, 'the buzzards descended upon the animals' carcasses. Avram shooed them away.' A grisly scene predicted the patriarchs' deaths occurring before the land's liberation. The Torah reveals two acts. One, the buzzards descended and ate the three carcasses. Two, Avram released the live fowl, namely the live pigeon and turtle-dove. Moshe began and Yehoshua completed the liberation operations.

A second, alternative interpretation is possible. The three domestic animals allude to the three sibling prophets emerging from Egypt – Miriam, Aharon and Moshe. Severing those animals foretold Avram that each one would die in the desert, not meriting entrance to the Holy Land. The ravenous buzzard's identity is linked with the *malach* of death. The surviving pigeon and turtledove, then, represent conquering Yehoshua and presiding priest Elazar – both of whom operated within Israel.

'When the sun set, a deep sleep fell upon Avram, a frightful dark descended upon him.' What did this consuming, ominous gloom portend? Commentators have, by and large, connected the horrific prophecy to the four hundred years of Egyptian sojourn, incarceration, bitter slavery and miraculous redemption.

A vexing problem arises. If suffering was preordained, why did the hapless Egyptians bear the brunt of a crime they were programmed to commit?

47. See chapter four, first *aliyah* ('Avraham ran to the cattle and took a young bull.')
48. See ibid., seventh *aliyah*, where a ram replaced Yitzchak as the sacrifice on Mt. Moriah
49. See chapter six, fifth *aliyah*. Yaakov brought Rivkah two goats, and placed the hairy skins on his arms in preparation for receiving his father's blessing.

One commentator[50] went so far as to suggest that there was, indeed, no decree of affliction in an alien land. The prophecy simply foretold facts. Namely, after the righteous tribes would pass on, a budding nation would blunderingly sin their way into oblivion, forfeiting Divine Providence along the way. The Egyptians would succumb to their innate antipathies and subjugate the defenseless Semites, left subject to the vicissitudes of chance. Miracles wrought out of consideration and deference to the patriarchs then bailed their wayward sons and released them from bitter bondage.

Students might consider another interpretation for the following two reasons. One, taken as a whole, patriarchs' merit is, so to speak, understood as an invariance. With that constant in place, it hardly seemed likely that the Almighty would abandon his Chosen People to happenstance. (See the discussion in *Parashat Noach*[51] regarding Divine Providence and Avraham.) Besides, even the most casual reader cannot help but observe so many queer events leading up to the Egyptian sojourn and culminating it. Were Yosef's sale, Potifar's wife's seduction and successful dream interpretations all simply coincidental?[52] Additionally, the upcoming verse – '*Also* the perpetrating nation that inflicts slavery I [Hashem] will judge' – gives an impression that the entire exile was also specifically directed by the heavenly Justice. The Sages[53] concurred, teaching that Hashem's edict required Yaakov to be dragged down to Egyptian exile in chains. The patriarch was spared the humiliation as the jealousy between the brothers and Yosef and the subsequent circumstances rearranged matters.

We must now circle back and answer why Paroah and his lackey taskmasters were worthy of punishment if they did no more than oblige Divine plans. *Parashat Vayigash* discusses the subject thoroughly.[54] The solution lies in the fact that the Egyptians were not out to earn brownie points in fulfilling Hashem's will. It was unadulterated wickedness. Additionally, Paroah and his people only got hit with the plagues after refusing to release the Israelites. They could have sidestepped the whole gory sequence by listening to Moshe's initial demand – 'Let My people go.'

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50. *Ran*
51. Chapter two, seventh *aliyah*
52. See chapter nine
53. *Bereshit Rabbah* 86:2
54. See chapter eleven, second *aliyah*

In review, this covenant's ghoulish and sanguinary vision answered Avram's questions about who will inherit the land and when will it happen. Specifically, Avram learned that before Canaan's liberation, a devastating exile had been *decreed*. Redemption from that hell would be concomitant with possessing the Holy Land. Nonetheless, the vision's main thrust did not center on Avram's descendants' forced exile. Instead the communication emphasized an extremely unstable prelude to the message's focal point – namely that his descendants would conquer Israel.

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Since the exile discussion has been broached in Avram's prophecy, a fascinating auxiliary subject arises. What lay behind the heavenly decree to send *Bnei* Yisrael into exile's inferno? Is someone specific to blame or perhaps Divine wisdom carved it – unrelated to finding fault? In a court of equities, Avram cannot be considered a culprit. Yaakov's sons far more likely shoulder responsibility. Clearly their baseless hatred of Yosef resulting in his shameful sale as a slave ranks high and obvious. The details and ramifications of Yosef's sale are discussed in the final four *parshiyot* of *Bereishit*. The brothers' underhanded scheming, the unconscionable cover-up – especially considering Yosef's conciliatory trip to Shechem – cannot be whitewashed let alone justified. Though Reuven's role is questionable, his hatred is not. No better proof of guilt can be submitted than the brothers' collective and unsolicited admission and confession in Egypt.[55] Moreover, since the brothers' sin brought Yosef to Egypt, their descendants' exile to there was an apt punishment. Even seemingly trifling details – such as the brothers' throwing Yosef into a pit pending judgment – exact retribution. Did Paroah not decree all male babies be thrown into the Nile? Also Yosef left Chevron's valley in order to determine his brothers' and flocks' welfare. Surely that corresponded to the famine-dried Canaan pastures that forced Yaakov to seek provision for flocks in greener Egypt.

Assuming that Yosef's brothers carried the onus, where is the justice to victimized Yosef? After all, his descendants did not curry preferential treatment in Paroah's perverse plans. The fact is that Yosef's behavior, secondarily,

55. Cf. chapter ten, fifth *aliyah*. (Apparently, Abravanel understands that Reuven participated in the collective *mea culpa*, although the following *passuk* there features Reuven chastising them all.)

did contribute. His indirect sin had to do with his pompous dreams and grandiose gloating in the retelling.

Examining Yaakov's behavior under a lens reveals his small part. Favoring Yosef with a multi-colored coat engendered poisonous envy and injected jealousy into the family dynamics. Finally, Yaakov's good intention in sending Yosef to reconcile with his wholly antagonistic brothers tragically underestimated the soured atmosphere. Unwittingly, the patriarch jeopardized his beloved Yosef's life.

Again with any court of equities, the judge's delicate job assesses levels of wrongdoing. Certainly in this case, the brothers' unjustified hatred carried the weightiest offense. Yosef and Yaakov's errors paled by comparison. As testimony to that conclusion, they both merited burial in Israel. Divine justice determined that the brothers' burial in Egypt fit the crime of exile that they set in motion with Yosef's sale. What can be said regarding Binyamin sadly implicated by association in a perfidious act he did not do? Though it offends sensibilities, it highlights a shuddering truism. Sometimes, a righteous minority does suffer the harsh consequences and punishment of the guilty majority.[56] The tribes' progeny remained expelled from the Holy Land on account of their ancestors' wrongdoing.

The Egyptian exile certainly assumes many guises and substrata of symbolism. One thread that runs throughout the Egyptian sojourn and Pesach story centers on sheep. Yosef traveled to Shechem to ascertain that the flocks were safe and well-tended. The brothers pastured their sheep in distant Dotan and sold Yosef to a people who worshiped sheep. The brothers slaughtered a goat, using the bloodied coat to deceive Yaakov. Hashem made Yosef viceroy over Egyptians who prostrated to sheep. Finally, when the Almighty granted an end to slavery, sacrificial lambs brought catharsis.

A theological dilemma presents itself. Did Hashem preordain a punishment before a crime had been perpetrated? Unmistakably, the exile shown to Avram in a cold field's night vision predicted a calamity preceding entry into the Land of Israel. Freedom of choice issues clatter front and center. Avram, in essence, was informed that he would have descendants. Those offspring would sin, be punished, get redeemed, and possess the land.

Crafting a reframe of the issue gives more than good commentary; it provides perspective. Freedom of choice is an absolute, inviolable human

56. See, e.g. BT *Bava Kamma* 60a

principle. It is erringly and preposterously cynical to think otherwise. Consider the fact that Hashem did not explicitly tell *what* the sin was or *who* would carry it out. Avram learned only of the sin's *consequences*. The emphasis here is on the fact that Hashem desired only to tell the sequence of events. Nothing else. No scripts dictated the actor's lines or roles let alone typecasts. Even the location was not penciled in. 'Avram, know that your descendants will be exiled to a foreign place, enslaved there.' No mention of Egypt.

Regarding the severed-animal covenant, Avram meticulously performed all that Hashem asked of him. Still, he could not make sense of the task. Besides the cruelty inflicted, dichotomies riddled the patriarch. While the flock animals got mauled, the winged ones were taken in his hands and later freed. Likely, Avram spent the entire following day in seclusion and meditative concentration until just before nightfall. Perhaps, he thought to himself, clarity will come. It didn't.

In this context the Torah writes 'deep darkness descended upon him.' Instinct told him that the prophetic message's pitch black setting suggested unspeakable blood-letting. In a Divine flash Avram heard a message: 'Understand that your offspring will be strangers in a strange land.' Avram got it. That pit feeling in his gut intimated hellish exile. Four hundred years separated him from the Promised Land.

Transgression and punishment landed the Jews in Egypt. But Avram now heard something else. The Almighty judges man's actions, granting no special dispensations. 'Also the perpetrating nation that inflicts slavery I [Hashem] will judge.' The maltreatment of Jewish subjects will result in a measure for measure retribution. After the revenge, 'they [the Jews] will depart with vast possessions.'

The Sages[57] propose that when the Torah writes that Yaakov had 'sent him [Yosef] from Chevron's valley'[58] the import is that the fateful send-off to Shechem highlighted Hashem greasing the wheels of history in order to fulfill a deep vision shown to the righteous patriarch buried in Chevron (Avraham). If necessary to get the guarantee going, Yaakov could have been subject to forceful manhandling down to Egypt in chains as cheapened, degraded chattel.[59] Avram's prophetic eye viewed it all. Replete with scenes, locations, players,

57. BT *Sotah* 11a
58. Chapter nine, second *aliyah*
59. *Bereshit Rabbah* 86:2

dialogues – nothing escaped him. Perhaps Avram time traveled. Yaakov held the lynchpin. Twelve tribes would be dragged after him into Egypt's furnace.

Turning to the four hundred year period of exile, note that it included various gradations of disenfranchisement – alien status, servitude, affliction. Yitzchak and Yaakov's years in Canaan where they were accorded thinly tolerated autonomy kicked off four centuries of misery. 'Know that your seed will be strangers in a strange land' was experienced by the latter two patriarchs on account of their living under other's control and whimsical dictates. *Bnei* Yisrael's level of servitude gradually grew in severity. Forty decades peaked with Paroah's demoralizing decrees, torture, and torment leading to mass murder which lasted eighty-six years, calculated from Miriam's birth until the Egyptian departure. Autonomy, slavery, and the final evil-decree stage total four hundred years. The actual breakdown is not spelled out for Avram because, again, that was not the main thrust of the severed-animal covenant.

The emphasis at this juncture is that the time was not yet ripe to inherit the land. The thirty extra years of exile totaling four hundred and thirty is explained at length in *Parashat Bo*.[60] But briefly, verses in *Yechezkel* delineate the transgressions that encompassed both idolatry and total immersion into Egyptian society.[61] So deep had sin dug into the collective Jewish psyche that had they not prayed intently and repented copiously, redemption could have been further forestalled.

(Previewing a far more detailed discussion that is interspersed through the final three *parshiyot* of *Bereshit*,[62] the Torah by no means views Yaakov's sons as vile and evil. Ultimately, they are seen as having sinned but they did not die sinners. Far from it. While there can be no conscionable excuse for their cruelty to Yosef, it was nevertheless an isolated event brought on by mitigating circumstances. Beyond doubt, all of Yaakov's children were righteous. Inviolably they became the twelve chosen tribes. Their callous miscalculation to sell Yosef was a gross aberation and represented a major juvenile deviation from their normally exemplary family life. The growth and redemption that resulted from their introspection forever characterized each and every one of Yaakov's tribes.)

60. See Abravanel to *Shmot* 12:21
61. See *Yechezkel* 20:5–12
62. See chapter ten, fifth *aliyah*; chapter eleven, seventh *aliyah*; and chapter twelve, fourth *aliyah*

Precisely because Avram's vision foreshadowed an arduous four hundred year Egyptian ordeal, it is incumbent to delve deeper into this subject. The overall Egyptian phase has proved central to Judaism and left an indelible mark.

The discussion has thus far assumed that the brothers' sin caused the exile. An alternate contention is that Hashem independently decreed the Egyptian sojourn. That is, the Divine plan should be seen as something entirely unrelated to Yosef's kidnapping and sale. The predominant rationale for Yaakov and his family to leave Canaan is that it ultimately dovetailed with Hashem's decree. The brothers' act was not causal; it merely facilitated the Divine edict.

Much discussion addresses the question why Hashem deemed it crucial for Jews to spend four centuries as strangers in a strange land? Fuller explanations are provided in *Parashat Bo*.[63] But for the purposes of Avram's covenant vision, some fundamental explanation is in order.

Huge bold banner headlines might read:

Hashem picked, chose & designated Jews for unique role

Avraham's descendants under Almighty's sole authority without intercessors or intermediares

Future dwelling in Holy Land precipitated Egypt exile

Affliction preludes acceptance of Torah on Mount Sinai

The acclimation and orientation to Divine guidance perforce required personal and physical slavery and torment. Human suffering transformed and purified the Jewish soul. Humiliation and degradation lopped off temporal impurities associated with arrogance and other undesirable traits. Logic dictated that if a people could survive centuries of servitude with dignity and fidelity to maintain the patriarchal ways, then they stood a chance of attaining the greatness that religious rigor demands. Dire and extreme circumstances root out dross like a metallurgist's pyre. To be sure, hardship mostly destroys man's divine spark and for that

63. *Shmot* 12

reason the risk was considerable. The Sages[64] posit that a mere pittance of Jews made their Egyptian exit. But for the surviving Jews, that harrowing experience provided a tiny nucleus upon which Divine promise could sprout, grow, and build.

The merit of receiving the Torah and inheriting Canaan could not have been bestowed otherwise. A nation dwelling in security and safely waxes fat, complacent, spoiled, bored, and lazy. Only tension tests torque, as kings David[65] and Shlomoh[66] write.

Additionally, Divine decree required a nation witnessing blatant miracles such as those meted out to the Egyptians so as to deeply etch Jewish faith and belief in Hashem. In sum, had Yaakov with the fledgling tribes remained in Canaan, avoiding the descent to Egypt's hellhole, then human and Jewish destiny would be a different thing altogether. Zecharyah[67] waxed eloquently on forging a people through fire. Malachi[68] phrased the future redemptive process as a cathartic crucible, rhetorically asking: How many Jews will take hold of their destiny? How many will remain imbued and indoctrinated with foreign value systems?

The tribes and their children dwelled amongst the Canaanites with their abominable practices. They were in need of removal of whatever dross clung to their souls. Egypt's pervasive and long pagan history presented the Jews with their monumental milestone – the fateful fork in their road to destiny. They could grab the opportunity to resist and triumph, creating an everlasting bond with Hashem. Failure spelled remaining in eternal exile, detached from their forefathers' faith forever.

A complementary explanation for the Divine decree of exile independent of sin rests upon this following axiom: Hashem created a world for the purpose of universal recognition and homage to His Holy Name. Word must get out that Hashem created a planet with objective rights and wrongs, reward and punishment – monotheistic imperatives. Accordingly, Hashem occasionally sends Divine messages to superpower gentile leaders. Paroah's dreams via Yosef[69] and Nevuchadnetzar via Daniyel[70] corroborate this idea. The exiled

64. *Mechilta D'Rabbi Yishmael, Bo*
65. *Tehillim* 11:5
66. *Mishlei* 17:3
67. *Zecharyah* 13:9
68. *Malachi* 3:3
69. Chapter ten, first *aliyah*
70. *Daniyel* 2

Jews in Egypt were a tool playing a crucial role in hammering home these faith fundamentals to an atheistic, defiant world. The Divine scheme utilized Jews, if you will, as a foible to take Egypt to task for its major world role as a Hashem-spoiler on account of their culture professing all that was pagan, immoral, and decadent. Patience, tolerance, acceptance, and respect for Egyptian culture steeped in denying Hashem's existence, providence and omniscience shrunk with each successive plague. At the Red Sea miracle, there was no mistaking it. Heaven's outstretched right arm and hand wrought all this. In recognition of the pivotal part the Jewish People played in publicizing Divine truths, a nascent nation carved out its place in history as Hashem's most precious.

In sum, the main reasons for exile were twofold but its commonality centered on dispensing loving heavenly compassion. Firstly, the Divine decree prepared the tribes through a purification process that can only be accomplished under the dire circumstances of foreign domination outside of the homeland. Secondly, Hashem devised a punishment for the pagan Egyptians because of their central role in attacking and misapplying religious belief. The plagues and miracles not only anchored the Divine faith to the escaping Jews, but it also evened a score with the Egyptian dissemination of godlessness. These two paramount lessons ring true for all mankind and for all times. So invaluable and lofty are they that even if it meant chaining and dragging patriarch Yaakov down to Egypt,[71] it would not have been in vain for these are axiomatic Torah truths.

Finally, poetic justice is laced throughout these passages. Hashem's compassion triumphed over haughty Egyptian blasphemy and irreverence. It emanated everlasting by and through the Jewish Nation. Secondary and tertiary themes figured in Avram's mysterious vision such as Divine punishment for selling Yosef and Canaan's growing moral turpitude still not yet ripe for defeat by Yehoshua's forces. This entire covenant assumed validation through the use of what the Torah described as smoke rising from an oven. That is, the Divine Presence, symbolized by a smoke-cloud, attested to the vision's perspicacity.

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71. Cf. BT *Shabbat* 89b

The Torah writes 'And you will come to your forefathers in peace, ultimately buried at a ripe old age.' Hashem revealed to Avram that he would not live to see the Jews inheriting the land but that he would live out his days in regal repose in Israel. Hashem informed the forefather that his and Sarai's interment would be next to mankind's first man and woman in Chevron's cave. However, Avram and Sarai would not resemble the first couple in every way. Specifically, unlike Adam and Chavah who experienced Eden's exile and family tragedy (Kayin and Hevel), Avram would conclude his days peacefully.

'The fourth generation will return home.' How are the generations calculated? The first generation includes Yosef and the tribes. Recall that according to the original court of equities theory, they were forced out of Israel due to their sins. Using Yehuda (first generation) as a reference, the generation thread through Peretz (second), Chetzron (third) and culminated in Calev (fourth) since he returned back home to the land of his fathers after Yosef's sale stain had been fully cleansed.

The severed-animal covenant vision then shifted to emphasis from the patriarchs to the occupying Canaan/Emorite forces. 'And the Emori had not yet exceedingly sinned.' What did that add to the otherwise Jewish angle? Plausibly, Avram needed clarification. If (following the court of equities theory) none of the three patriarchs sinned, and (in accordance with the crucible and publicizing faith theory) the purification process would occur later, then why did Hashem not arrange for the patriarchs to take over the Land, and allow the exile/catharsis to commence with the generation that would experience exile? This verse provided the answer. Since the Emorites had not yet reached rock bottom, the patriarchs could not yet inherit. The descendants had to wait for the tribes' fourth generation due to their prior sin or Divine fiat. Either way, more water still had to flow under the bridge.

Avram awoke from his second vision in time to see smoke bellowing from a lime kiln oven. More accurately, Avram saw smoke *as if* bellowing from an oven's flames. In reality, the flames and smoke had been licking the calf, goat, and ram that Avram cut down the middle. This consummated the Almighty's covenant. Interestingly, Avram did not participate in the covenant by walking in between the animals, since he had not bound himself to anything in particular. Only smoke wafted along the columns, smoke that symbolized the mysterious *Shechinah*. Note that the same tangible smoke reappeared

at Mount Sinai. Burnt offering sacrifices during Moshe's[72] and Shlomoh's[73] respective eras ascended via the *Shechinah* fire coming down from heaven which signaled satisfaction and Hashem-connectedness.

Avram asked for and received information regarding *when* he would inherit. Hashem volunteered the parameters of *what* he would inherit. The borders of the Promised Land are delineated 'from the Egyptian River until the great Euphrates.' The southwestern river border is not the Nile but the Shichor River.[74]

'On that day Hashem entered the covenant with Avram.' From that moment forward, an eternal promise had been solemnly pledged. Avram's descendants took unencumbered, nominal title of the Land of Israel. All of Avram's issues were deciphered. No detail had been omitted or left dangling.

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'Sarai, Avram's wife had not borne him a child. She had an Egyptian maid-servant named Hagar.' Sarai's grief did not have to do with self-pity or feelings of inadequacy. Her devastation centered on her inability to provide her husband with a son to whom he could pass his life's work, message and passion. Undoubtedly, she had learned of the Divine promise to give the land to Avram's descendants and wanted to contribute her part, her son. *Let my son be the one to receive Avram's legacy!*

In advanced age, Sarai ruefully concluded that the promise sidelined her. 'She told Avram "It's clear now that Hashem has prevented me from bearing child. Take my handmaiden posthaste. Perhaps she will serve as my surrogate."' Sarai hoped the plan would enable her, if only vicariously, to help raise Avram's son and thereby participate in this Divine scheme. Note Sarai's wise thinking. Intuitively, she comprehended a secondary position she would be relegated to if she allowed her husband a full-fledged wife from outside the household. With baby in tow, a strange woman would effectively elbow Sarai into abject oblivion. Choosing a maidservant kept her position intact regardless.

Avram's reaction to Sarai's suggestion is not recorded though he probably resented the idea. Only after repeated pleas does the verse say 'and Avram obeyed his wife's voice.' Apparently this issue became a bone of contention

72. *Vayikra* 9:24
73. *Divrei HaYamim* II 7:1
74. Cf. *Yehoshua* 13:3

until Avram let Sarai have her way. Interestingly, a close reading indicates that Avram's overcoming his reluctance to marry Hagar had more to do with pleasing Sarai than desiring to father children or even to hasten Hashem's promise. After the marriage, Sarai very much remained as close a wife to Avram as she had previously been. Ultimately, Avram's decision concurred with Sarai's way of thinking. Ten years in Canaan should have amply allowed Avram and Sarai to conceive naturally. Once Sarai's logic prevailed, Avram had no reservations about marrying Hagar of Egyptian descent and different skin color.

Soon after the marriage, Hagar conceived and began looking disparagingly down at her matron. Suddenly, serving Sarai piqued the Egyptian princess as Hagar assumed that now Divine Providence shone brightly on her proudly protruding belly. Sarai, visibly upset by the taunt and challenge, expected her husband to take this brazen handmaiden wife to task. Sarai charged 'I gave her to you.' 'Do something,' she pleaded. Sarai felt as if her own hands were tied since the two women, in practice, shared a similar spousal status. In this case, Avram deflected Sarai's analysis. 'Hagar is your maidservant. Treat her as you will.' The patriarch wanted to be left out of it because in his opinion the original maidservant position did not drop away due to her subsequent marriage and pregnancy.

Sarai chastened Hagar and essentially chased her out. Did Sarai misuse her power? Applying ancient philosophers' personality theory, Sarai's motivations made perfect sense. It posits that when an individual exhibits imbalanced personality traits the remedy entails bending it temporarily to the opposite extreme.[75] In Hagar's case, the corrective measure consisted of subjecting doses of "tough love" in order to arrive at a golden mean. Thus when Sarai displayed derision, the intended affect was to tame Hagar's swelling hubris. The matriarch purposely assumed a gruff demeanor in dealing with her handmaid's laxity and insolence.

The Sarai-Hagar crisis triggered extreme emergency measures. Hagar balked at Sarai's caustic discipline. It dismally failed to inculcate in Hagar the desired behavioral moderation through modification. Challenged beyond her limit and failing to grasp her own shortcomings, Hagar sulked.

The handmaid packed up her belongings and bolted – enough was enough. She made it to an adjacent desert where a totally unexpected encounter

75. Cf. *Mishneh Torah De'ot* 2:2; *Shemonah Perakim* 4

challenged her, changing her life. 'A heavenly *malach* found her at a well.' Who/what was this visitor/visitation? Likely, Hagar had a prophetic experience wherein she saw a *malach* appearing in human form.[76] Prophecy is mostly the exclusive domain of worthy pious prophets. Yet, on occasion in *Tanach*, exceptions arise. Hagar is a fair example. In her instance the prophecy was solely for Avram's sake, to get Hagar back to him and prevent her from miscarrying Avram's eldest child. The four epigrammatic, staccato statements of the *malach* were broken up with intervals of silence. If she would turn on her heel and return after a first or second statement, there would be no need for the *malach* to continue this most incongruous conversation with a spiritual commoner.

Unlike Manoach and his wife who trembled when visited with a fiery gyrating *malach*,[77] Hagar acted calmly because of the *malach*'s non-threatening human vesture. It appears that the handmaid quickly surmised that this stranger had been heaven-sent. A normal person simply would not have been privy to information the *malach* clearly possessed. He read her mind, assuaged her concerns, confusion, and fears.

The conversation opened up with pointed observations and questions. 'Hagar, handmaid of Sarai: Where did you come from and where are you going?' Implied in the *malach's* questions is: By what standard did you determine to leave Avram's household? Surely you know that the patriarch loves you. His wealth and generosity are there for you. Calling her on poor judgment, the *malach* rhetorically asked if it made sense to trade security, affection, and comfort for a barren desert wasteland. "Leaving an honorable patriarch, will you find a better life as a wandering gypsy nomad?" the *malach* seemed to probe. Drawn to respond, Hagar said 'I needed to get away from my matron Sarai.' The concession came partially at first. Hagar acknowledged that no fault lay with her loving husband. She found the household, too, not lacking anything as integrity and refinement pervaded the atmosphere. Sarai, Hagar confessed, was the sole problem. I suffer in her company, she confided.

Stymied, the prodding *malach* told her to 'return to your matron. Accept your handmaid status willingly under her direction.' The *malach* chose his words carefully. That is, since Hagar understood her position as Sarai's handmaid, then she must act accordingly. Hagar still did not comprehend that her

76. See chapter four, first *aliyah* regarding the various levels of prophecy.
77. See *Shoftim* 13

pregnancy and attitude caused the atmosphere to poison. The handmaid had not yet learned that remedy and reconciliation would follow renewed humility.

Stubbornly, Hagar disagreed with the *malach*'s assessment. She feared that a return to Sarai would be disastrous. The handmaid believed that her jealous matron was bent on overworking, heckling, and humiliating her until stress aborted her baby. To alleviate this obsession, the *malach* promised that 'your descendants will be many, too many to count.' Hagar clung to her anxiety thinking that she might lose this baby and grow populous from other pregnancies. Promising, the *malach* assured her 'you will carry to full term and have a son; you will name him Yishmael for Hashem has seen your anguish.' This dispelled all fear and paved the way for her return home. Note that Avram and not Hagar named Yishmael. Hagar probably told Avram about the entire desert exchange, including the baby's name, but undoubtedly Avram gave the name that reflected Hashem's hearkening to the fact that Hagar felt harassed.

Getting a read on Yishmael's character from the verse's adjectives is not simple. Synonyms like wild, non-conventional, primitive and undisciplined all come to mind. What best portrayed him? While some commentators learned negative traits about Yishmael, it leads the reader to a difficulty. Why would the *malach* induce Hagar's return to Avram's household with a disparaging picture of the baby? In context it makes more sense to say that the description is meant to be rhetorical. Essentially the heavenly facilitator asked the handmaid: Why do you abandon Avram's house in order to give birth and raise your child in a desert? Do you intend him to be a wild ass? Do you see Yishmael's future as a societal misfit who dwells in craggy cliffs? Answering the rhetorical rebuke, the *malach* rejects such a pessimistic prognosis. The truer picture is that 'his hand be on others and others' hand on him. He will dwell among brethren.' This presaged a normal active social life and not a stranger to family and friends.

This was the *malach*'s final argument. It set Hagar's mind at rest and she headed back. A desert nomad life would not bring out the best in her son. To the contrary. The *malach* exposed Hagar's folly though no response is recorded other than 'and she called the Name of Hashem Who spoke to her "you are Hashem Who sees me."' The verse baffles the reader. Why does the Torah indicate that Hashem communicated with her when clearly it was a

malach? Besides, the *malach* appeared to the handmaid as a man. Why would she think a deity had spoken to her?

The answer brings us to an important point in general when it comes to Divine communication. Prophecy, whether directly from Hashem or through an intermediary, always get referred to as Hashem. Ultimately the communication is granted by the Almighty. Take, for example, a king's messenger who speaks in his highness' name.[78] In summary, Hagar expressed the sentiment that Hashem's telepathic agent had uncanny abilities. He saw right through her.

§§§

'Avram was ninety nine and Hashem appeared to him. I am the Almighty. Walk wholly before Me.' After the severed-animal covenant, Avram believed that he would father children. He considered the new "arrival" (Yishmael) the fulfillment of the prophecy and that the handmaid's son would inherit the Holy Land. Precisely because of that mistaken premise, Hashem appeared at this time, commanding the patriarch to undergo circumcision. That act signaled to Avram a prelude to fathering another child – this one surrounded by a halo of mystical holiness. A miracle child would be conceived with Sarai immediately after the *brit milah*. Upon reflection, Avram learned that Yishmael's banal birth circumstances lacked depth. Yishmael was spiritually crass because Avram conceived him while uncircumcised, blemished. Yitzchak being born from Sarai personified otherworldliness; Yishmael personified vulgarity being born from Hagar.

The *brit milah* precept coming at the patriarch's old age was worded vaguely on purpose. It perplexed Avram. Hashem intended this cryptic commandment to solicit and whet Avram's curiosity thereby inducing him to delve deeply into the matter. To be sure, circumcision served as a springboard for further analysis and reflection. The Torah began the passage telling of Avram's well-advanced years. *Brit milah* aside, any one hundred year old would be challenged to father a child. All the more so when that centenarian needed to recover from circumcision. For that reason, Hashem employed abstract communication bordering on the abstruse.

'I am the Almighty. Walk before Me and be righteous.' The Almighty was on the verge of commanding Avram to do something that carried two major hindrances. To assuage the first one concerning the patriarch's age and

78. Cf. *Shmot* 3:1-4

circumcision, the Torah writes 'I am the Almighty.' Divine omnipotence is not deterred. Period. Hashem would enable Avram to overcome the challenges. Second, Avram wondered if circumcision rendered him blemished, incomplete and unwholesome. 'Walk wholly before Me.' Cutting away foreskin facilitates a harmonious presence of mind, an invigoration of spirit. The patriarch internalized a simple, fundamental truth. Human perfection results from one thing: devotion to Hashem's will through observing His word. Shortcoming and inadequacy come about when commandments are disregarded. In that vein, circumcision was handed down to Avraham's descendants forever.

Hashem promised 'and I will greatly increase you.' This alluded to Yitzchak's birth. Avram could not miss the irony. Thirteen years with youthful Hagar had not produced any other children. The new *brit* covenant would bring an amazing surprise. A second son would be born under completely different circumstances – and mothers. Yitzchak and not Yishmael assumed the sole title of Avram's rightful and legal heir. The prized Land of Israel went to him.

When this prophetic message concluded, Avram had a lot to ponder and digest. It seems that immediately he secluded himself and entered a prayerful, meditative state. 'And Avram lied down and Hashem spoke with him saying...' Hashem appeared to the patriarch in this restful repose to make communication easier. That is, man at rest does not have the distractions that human senses stimulate, drowning out spiritual attunement. Avram achieved heightened mental perspicacity.

Hashem informed Avram that 'I enter a covenant with you. You will be a patriarch to [many] nations.' This contract, so to speak, was made by and between two willing parties. Hashem and beloved Avram undertook to fulfill the accord's conditions. Note that in the severed-animal covenant, Hashem unilaterally promised to provide Avram with a son and title to the Holy Land. Unspoken yet understood in that pact was that Avram would grow populous. To concretize this tiding, the event called for a name change. 'And you will be a patriarch to [many] nations. You will no longer be called Avram but rather Avraham.'

An additional letter alluded to the patriarch's expanded cross-cultural and societal role. Undoubtedly, Terach's name choice intended his son to assume prominence. But the appellation intimated leadership confined to proximate environs, and had not hinted to offspring. Divine intervention altered that original name implying more than just renewed virility and fatherhood. The

letter addendum infused spiritual vitality that accompanied the acceptance of the Divine commandments, such as circumcision, bringing about the merit of multitudinous progeny.

Note that while a patriarchal name change occurred with Avraham and Yaakov, there was a fundamental difference. With regard to Avraham, the name change nullified and abrogated Avram to the extent that tradition considers it an infringement to call the first patriarch by his birth name. Yet, identifying Yaakov as such (and not Yisrael) is permitted.[79] The difference lies in the circumstances of the original name giving. In Avraham's case, the first name was jettisoned because idolatrous Terach bestowed it. Yaakov's name was granted by patriarch Yitzchak for all time. The *malach* provided Yaakov with a victory blessing in the form of a cognomen without ever intending to supplant Yitzchak's original choice.[80]

Reviewing the covenantal subject, what were the particular advantages of Avraham having prodigious descendants? Three distinct areas are presaged:

- The *malach* informed the patriarch of major quantifiable offspring; they will grow exponentially as the verse writes 'I [Hashem] will grant you great virility.'
- Avraham heard that his descendants will vary in type and quality. Consider how he fathered the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religions, let alone the nations that developed from Avraham's last wife Keturah. The verse states 'and I [Hashem] have made you into [many] nations.'
- The *malach* promised him a noble and aristocratic line as evidenced by 'and kings will descend from you.'

Seventh *aliyah*

'And I [Hashem] establish My covenant with you and your descendants after you forever as an eternal covenant to be for you your Almighty and the Almighty of your descendants.'

This covenant formalized an extremely fundamental and radical event. It promised to forge an intimate relationship based on Divine Providence with

79. BT *Berachot* 13a
80. See chapter eight, second *aliyah*

Avraham's descendants. A bond of closeness was guaranteed for those who walk in the first patriarch's ways.

An irrevocable deed to Canaan followed. Indeed for Avraham the Holy Land was a gift. But for his descendants, the land became a legacy and heritage. 'And I [Hashem] gift you the land and [inheritance] for your progeny after you. A possession for perpetuity.' It was of little import that the gift of land did not fully materialize in the patriarch's lifetime. Similarly irrelevant for the descendants of Avraham was the reality of the Jewish exiles and physical separation from Israel. The connection between the Jewish People and their homeland remains inviolable; it is Divinely covenantal forever.

Note the overlap of these twin promises of Divine Providence and Canaan. Avraham's prophecy taught contingency. Jewish providence is activated and operational, so to speak, only after the nation resided in the land – after having received the Torah on Mt. Sinai. The Sages[81] marked a close causal relationship when they said that Jews living outside Israel are stripped of providence.

When Hashem informed Avraham of the obligations He had committed to in the severed-animals accord, the Torah taught Avraham and progeny's side of the pact. 'And Hashem said to Avraham to keep the covenant as well as your descendants after you forever.' This specifically referred to *brit milah*. For the very first time since the flurry of Avraham's visions and prophecies, the Torah stresses mutuality. As opposed to the earlier and unilateral nature of the accord this time a deal was struck, as a manner of speaking, between two parties: Hashem on the one hand and Avraham plus descendants on the other. *Brit milah* brought a certain parity that had been lacking in Avraham before the name change and removal of his foreskin.

The Sages[82] asked how was it that Avraham knew where to perform circumcision. Logic dictated male genitalia as the right place because the verse alludes to 'males uncut.' There is another fundamental answer and it applies to every single Divine commandment. The prophetic vision assumed perfect clarity to the recipient; there never was left the slightest trace of doubt regarding expectation. The prophetic medium beamed a pictured message. Through *brit milah*, the patriarch comprehended that the children he fathered

81. BT *Ketubot* 110b
82. *Bereshit Rabbah* 46:5; BT *Shabbat* 108a

were infused with the mystical spirituality associated with the fulfillment of Divine precepts. In this case the patriarch's body bore a royal mark, heavenly escutcheon. Foreskin resection has the ability to moderate and sanctify sexual relations in a way that positively affects male and female progeny equally.

Subsequent to commanding Avraham and his progeny to undergo *brit milah*, another verse relayed two benefits. The first fostered a reasonable sexual perspective including extreme reticence toward overindulgence, and the second stressed uniformity. *Brit milah* served physical notice of the heavenly decree and set Jews apart. *Brit milah* identifies Avraham's descendants no less than a branded flock or herd designate ownership. 'And it (circumcision) will be a sign between Me and you forever.' Commentators grasped the vast power that lay with this sign. The Sages[83] portrayed Avraham vigilantly standing guard at the gates of *gehinnom* to keep circumcised Jews from harm's way.

Since *brit milah* accrued benefit to Avraham and his descendants, why did the Creator not command Adam to do it? The answer is that he did not need *brit milah* because from the outset Adam intuitively grasped this *mitzvah*'s rationale. His programming, so to speak, adequately prioritized sexuality. The first man's presence of mind focused him. Ingesting the Knowledge Tree fruit threw him out of kilter and destabilized him. Figuratively, the Knowledge fruit tragically poisoned untold generations. The fruit's potency stubbornly lodged in man's system. Singlehandedly, Avraham blanched that blemish. His strength of character provided the antidotal properties that neutralized the fruit's aphrodisiac. Adam was driven from Eden while Avraham distances his descendants from purgatory.

It is interesting that only human male physiognomy has foreskin and that animals lack it. How sad a commentary it is that singles out mankind in the reckless pursuit of the mundane – material possessions, eating, drinking and sexual relations.

'Circumcise on the eighth day.' The commandment informed Avraham that he and the entire male household needed to undergo *brit milah* regardless of their current respective ages. However from the time when that directive was given and onward, the precept is carried out on the eighth day from birth when infants are strong enough and out of life-threatening danger. The

83. *Bereshit Rabbah* 48:8

Rambam[84] noted Divine wisdom concerning the timing. He writes that had this commandment been put off, more pain and a longer recovery might have interfered with compliance.

Brit milah applied to 'Avraham's household and servants' though in their case the timing is less critical. Future generations would circumcise their servants upon purchase or birth. Hashem made the commandment incumbent on Avraham's wider circle of associates to engender a uniform environment on par with the patriarch's family standards.

The Almighty commanded 'the *brit milah* done on man's flesh forever.' Many precepts are associated with man's belongings such as *tzitzit, tefillin,* and *mezuzah*. Why was it insufficient to place the sign on articles of clothing for example? If the mark were not affixed to man then, in theory, he could divest himself of it. Hashem intended this sign as a permanent bodily fixture and reminder. The Sages[85] attested to King David's deep satisfaction knowing that his *brit milah* never abandoned him. An insuperable and inviolable Divine connection constantly enwrapped and protected him.

Undoubtedly *brit milah*'s power, logic, and rationale factored high with regards to the Creator's world schema. Self-control and moderation certainly weigh inordinately prominent. The dereliction of compliance carries disastrous consequences. Those Jewish 'men with foreskin suffer their souls cut off from the rest of their people because they abrogate My covenant.' Ostracizing those who intentionally flout *brit milah* effectively isolates offenders from the purer spiritual worlds of *malachim* and the righteous. Generally, Divine punishment directly corresponds to the commandment's essence or aim. In this case, since *brit milah* grants privileged entry to the world of spirituality then it follows that negligence and non-compliance blocks access to otherworldly splendor.

The *parashah* concludes with the fulfillment of the *brit milah*. 'And the Almighty said to Avraham: "Your wife Sarai's name is changed; Sarah is her name."' Likely this heavenly dictate and the ensuing conversation were not a separate prophecy. The message occurred while the patriarch had applied his full mental prowess to comprehend the earlier communiqués. Textually this is borne out because at the end of the *parashah* the Torah writes 'And when

84. *Moreh Hanevuchim* 3:49
85. BT *Menachot* 43b

He [Hashem] finished speaking with him then the Almighty ascended from Avraham.' Immediately afterwards, the patriarch carried out Hashem's *brit milah* commandment.

An analysis of the prophecy reveals three separate components:

- Avraham learned the might associated with *brit milah*; it empowered and catapulted the patriarch into a cosignatory, so to speak, fully capable of entering a mutual covenant with the Creator.
- It apprised and instructed Avraham how to execute the *brit milah* commandment.
- Prophecy foretold Sarah's name change and birth of Yitzchak. Note that since the last pronouncement held prominence, it was broached first.

Sarai's name was changed; 'Sarah is her [new] name.' It was only fair and fitting that the patriarch's devoted and loyal wife should fully participate in the wonderful happenings. Specifically, Sarah's original name limited her ability to gain stature with her husband. Sarah, being more general, alluded to a matriarchal status stretching well beyond. Her progeny encompassed vast nations and peoples. It goes without saying that all the heavenly blessings bestowed upon Avraham included Sarah as couples are a fused unit.

'I [Hashem] have blessed her and I also gave her a child from you.' The verse usage of past instead of future tense is not uncommon *Tanach* style. It means that, in a manner of speaking, the blessing was heaven-ordained. The tiding tightened and clinched their marriage the way a child bonds parents, the way a prince bonds the queen to the king. Understandably, children endear spouses to each other. From a practical standpoint, a son or prince provides security for the mother after her husband passes away.

When Avraham heard how Sarah would give birth 'to nations and kings' the verse says that 'he fell down laughing.' As mentioned previously, the patriarch's posture referred to his seeking seclusion and religious introspection. Avraham needed to see the whole, big picture delightfully developing before his eyes. Laughter possessed him. 'Can a man one hundred years old father a child? With ninety year old Sarah?' Despite the sting of Yishmael's abrupt removal from Avraham's legacy, he still could not help being amused. Struggling with reason, Avraham muttered that the birth defied nature.

Pay attention to Avraham's observations. Regarding himself, Avraham asked if a centenarian can father a child. But when it came to Sarah, he

expressed two things. One is Sarah capable of conceiving, carrying a child? Jewish tradition understood that the matriarch had severe gynecological disorders. And two, can any nonagenarian give birth? Avraham, considering his advanced age, shook his head in disbelief. The message's entire tenor rang too weird because in the best of scenarios when one partner is old and the other young it is a long-shot. With both the male and female practically ancient, the story went beyond outlandish.

Avraham's faith answered all of the questions. He concluded that Hashem had promised a miracle of miracles, a wonder of wonders. As the patriarch came to grips with the first part of this prophetic message, his thoughts turned to Yishmael. Two possibilities presented themselves. Did the communiqué presage a premature death for the patriarch's first son, necessitating the promise of a second? Or perhaps Yishmael's longevity did not come into play. Something intrinsic to Yishmael precluded his inheriting the Holy Land and participating in the patriarch's covenant. 'And Avraham said to Hashem: "Will Yishmael live before You?"' The Almighty answered that Sarah will have a boy, Yitzchak. The patriarch's laughter did not imply a lack of faith, as evidenced by Hashem not rebuking him for it, telling him instead to enshrine and commemorate his laughter by the child's name (*Yitzchak*). It alluded to the patriarch's conclusion that the birth would be miraculous because, given Avraham and Sarah's reality, no logical explanation made sense. In *Parashat Vayera*, the discussion focuses on their contrasting reactions to the positively giddy heavenly tiding.[86]

Hashem reiterated that 'your wife Sarah will have your son and you shall call him Yitzchak. I [Hashem] will establish my covenant with him forever and with his descendants.' The Almighty dispelled the patriarch's confusion. Mistakenly, he thought that the good tidings were for him and through him. Since Avraham had previously assumed that Yishmael would be his heir, he figured that there was no pressing need for Yitzchak, especially if Yishmael would enjoy normal longevity. Corrected, Avraham learned that *Sarah* would have a son. Since Yishmael was not Sarah's son, he did not inherit from the patriarch. From Sarah's perspective Yitzchak was an absolute necessity regardless of Yishmael's longevity. The combined merit of Avraham and Sarah enabled Yitzchak to gain sole and exclusive legacy and heritage.

86. See chapter four, second *aliyah*

Assuaging Avraham's concern regarding Yishmael's untimely death, Hashem promised 'I [Hashem] will bless him.' Certain aspects of Avraham's bounty would accrue to Yishmael, especially prolific descendants. In addition, just as Avraham would be a patriarch to kings, Yishmael would merit nobility in the form of twelve princes. Still, the gifts of the Torah, Israel, and concomitant Divine Providence go to Yitzchak and not Yishmael. Two nations cannot don the same heavenly crown. It goes to the patriarch and matriarch's miracle son.

Yitzchak's birth date was foretold in the verse as 'this time next year.'[87] Avraham could make no mistake about his legacy and rightful heir because perfect clarity precluded contest. Yishmael, due to his father's righteousness, received good tidings but had been cut out of the most important spiritual and land inheritances.

Avraham's prophecy concluded and 'Hashem's [word] departed from him.' It appeared that Hashem put a curt end to the communication. Perhaps it signaled to Avraham that Hashem did not want to entertain any more of Avraham's notions petitioning more blessings for Yishmael.

The Almighty's Name connoting justice (*Elohim*) is utilized throughout the *milah* and birth of Yitzchak narrative indicating the propriety of the two sides of a pact following through on their commitments. It also conveys the idea that all the good tidings granted the saintly couple were fully deserved.

Avraham wasted no time in performing *brit milah*. 'And Avraham took Yishmael his son in addition to his resident and purchased servants, all household males…and he circumcised their foreskins on that very day as Hashem instructed him.' Avraham began and personally performed the surgery on his only son Yishmael. Presumably, others observed Avraham's technique so that they could do likewise. Afterwards, Avraham circumcised those boys born of his handmaidens since he was a father figure to them. The purchased servants were circumcised last because they had not yet grown close to their master. Despite the amount of boys and men, the patriarch diligently attended to the task until it was completed that very day.

Why does the Torah mention Avraham and Yishmael's age? Tellingly the verse revealed an important observation. Despite Avraham's near one hundred years he did not consider delaying his own surgery, circumcising others first

87. Chapter four, first *aliyah*

to gauge the effects, and allowing them to heal so that they could attend to his post-op needs and recovery. Instead the patriarch's zealousness desired a hasty performance of the Almighty's will. Caution with regards to Torah adherence does not cut it. Personal comfort did not concern him.

Yishmael, on the other hand, was a strapping thirteen year old. Surely, Hagar doted and spoiled her only son. Mother and son might also have requested putting off the surgery until others could be available to assist the recovering youth. To their credit and upbringing, no such dispensation occurred. Commandment enthusiasm necessitates alacrity. This truth and value the patriarch possessed and managed to instill in every last member of his sizeable household.

CHAPTER FOUR

PARASHAT VAYERA

THE TESTIMONY

First *aliyah*

'And the Almighty appeared to him [Avraham] in Elonei Mamre as he sat at the tent's entrance in the heat of the day.'

Parashat Lech Lecha concluded with Avraham and his male household members undergoing circumcision. Disregarding medical and personal concerns, the patriarch performed Hashem's commandment thereby entering the Divine covenant. The present *parashah* opens with a visit from his newly acquired pact Partner. 'And the Almighty appeared to him.' The recuperating patient was on his tent's stoop, when he spotted people approaching in the distant horizon.

As with the earlier narratives that contain multiple layers of understanding, this episode lends itself to various dimensions of interpretation. Before delving into the verses' plain meaning, a brief overview based on the Sages'[1] observations follows.

The main reason for Hashem calling on Avraham was to check in on the convalescent and attend to his recovery. The Creator observed the patriarch's selfless dedication. This visit emphasized His deep regard for the first forefather and Hashem graced him with an aura of Divine radiance and warmth associated with prophecy. The Sages[2] put it in perspective via a comparison to animal sacrifices. A peace-offering naturally evokes heavenly pleasure and blessing. What, then, can be said about this one hundred year old patriarch's

1. BT *Sotah* 14a; *Bava Metzia* 86b
2. *Bereshit Rabbah* 48:5

brit milah? Judaism espouses a fundamental axiom that is both paradoxical and counterintuitive: Intimate relationships with the Almighty are possible. The patriarchs, beginning with Avraham, forged personal closeness with the Almighty based on adhering to Torah values.

The powerful, therapeutic sun rays worked wonders and soothed Avraham's ailing body. Concomitantly, Hashem arranged for three *malachim* to appear as three wanderers. The first one's function was to heal the reeling effects of Avraham's surgery and rehabilitation. The mere sight of the *malach* brought these intended results and he began feeling stronger. The second *malach* announced Sarah's imminent pregnancy and miracle son's birth. The last one was dispatched to destroy Sedom. Morally solvent, Sedom wasn't. The region's decadence paved its decline and downfall. Likely, Lot's guardian *malach* was the same one that had been entrusted to heal Avraham.

The small delegation, seeing Avraham laid up and alone, was prepared to take a raincheck and avoid troubling him. However the patriarch nixed their plans and despite his post-op agony 'ran to greet them.' Graciously he said 'I beg of you. Please, my masters, find favor with me and do not pass by your servant.' Apparently drawing on his renewed vigor, Avraham sat the visitors down, and planned a generous repast. He 'ran to the herd' desiring to serve the choicest meat. Yishmael, 'the lad enthusiastically' helped. Considering that the patriarch's tent overflowed with patients, these guests were requested to 'take a little water' from the attending womenfolk. Avraham showed them a comfortable place outside 'to lean under the tree' because, again, ailing men were lying sprawled inside the tent.

Avraham, alone, attended to his guests. Their presence worked wonders as the patriarch perceptibly healed throughout the meal. When it came time for their departure he accompanied them – at full strength – on their way. In sum, according to the Sages this episode is the first of several gestures intended to evince the favor that Avraham curried with Hashem. If pre-circumcised Avram heard only sparingly and sporadically from Hashem, the new post-circumcised Avraham gained, so to speak, unhindered entry into spiritual domains. The patriarch had been inducted to heaven's inner sanctum. Although the vision is directly linked to the *brit* at the end of the prior *parashah*, Avraham's post-covenant upgraded relationship with Hashem was dramatic enough to justify starting a fresh *parashah* with this visit narrative.

The balance of the *parashah* delineates the additional manifestations of the Almighty's newly-earned intense love for Avraham.

There is a plainer dimension to the vision. 'And the Almighty appeared to him [Avraham] in Elonei Mamre as he sat at the tent's entrance in the heat of the day.' The vision enlightened Avraham as to Sedom's transgressions. It informed him why the entire region tottered on the brink of destruction. Hashem, training the patriarch to fill his destined role as father of nations, wanted Avraham to learn empathy for others – even the wicked. Public defenders cannot choose their clients but they can choose their profession. Avraham was in the business of extending a helping hand regardless.

The vision provided another vantage point. Hashem wanted Avraham to get a close-up look at Sedom's immorality so that he could better educate his descendants to walk in the Almighty's ways. Straight pathways steer clear of Sedom's mishaps and disastrous consequences.

While Jewish tradition is filled with wonderfully elaborate legends concerning the three patriarchs and their respective struggles, little gets discussed in the verses per se. The Torah's crafted brevity and style do not provide in-depth character development but rather utilize innuendo and subtlety. It invites and relies on sophisticated readers to invest their time and toil to develop appropriate and pertinent responses to explain the apparent shorthand notation. Accordingly, a close reading reveals important pieces of their personality puzzle and pencils a larger persona portrait. An example is this story of Avraham healing from circumcision.

The verse's description tells much about Avraham in establishing that he sat 'in Elonei Mamre at the tent's entrance in the heat of the day.' The *Rambam*[3] understood that the three patriarchs trained their minds, meditating upon Hashem as a matter of habit. In a manner of speaking, that meant that despite Avraham's occupation with other pursuits, he kept a "Hashem-tab" open as his life's central focus.

The "Hashem-file" became a way of life, enabling the patriarch to experience Hashem even in the most mundane activities. Since eating, for example, was solely to keep a healthy body strong for the purposes of better serving Hashem, focusing his conscious thought on Hashem while engaged in such activity was quite natural. Ancient philosophers maintained that as beings

3. *Moreh Nevuchim* III:51

rank higher in spiritual achievement, they are more capable of harmoniously encompassing expanding lists of ideas or entities. Hashem, so to speak, ranks highest and all reality is completely engulfed by His existence. A highly differentiated human being can thus multi-task in earthly and heavenly pursuits with no discordance, just as one can simultaneously see and hear.

Pre-*brit milah*, Avraham's prophecy required immense and intensive preparation. Even then it had been localized to narrow venues and circumstances. When sporadic prophecy came, it followed self-mortification and self-deprivation typical of all prophetic readiness. His concentrated state and acute inner-awareness effectively muffled outside distractions. Circumcised Avraham attained Hashem-awareness with greater clarity, ease and regularity. Now he could receive Divine communication, so to speak, during a morning traffic jam. Hashem appearing to Avraham in Elonei Mamre even as the heat of a new day dawned proves the point. Elonei Mamre was a bustling town. The timing of 'heat of the day' coincided with morning when towns typically teem and hustle. Details such as these teach that Avraham achieved pious sync even in the most distracting places and times. His fine-tuned "Hashem-tab" allowed such multi-tasking. Simultaneous with receiving Divine communication, Avraham welcomed and greeted visitors as well as attending to more mundane matters.

In summary, the patriarch's piety effectively expanded and extended his range of Divine moments and messages. Focusing on the Almighty did not require Avraham's escaping worldly stimuli. Before Avraham was circumcised, the Divine message overwhelmed him due to its sheer magnitude and power. It felled him. However after his circumcision, religiously mature Avraham managed the force, standing his ground.[4] At the conclusion of the wanderers' visit with the patriarch the verse says that 'the men turned from there, proceeding to Sedom. Avraham still stood before Hashem.' Transcendental harmony provided a steady undergirding.

'And he [Avraham] lifted his eyes and saw three men standing about him.' Few *Tanach* subjects have fired rabbinic imagination more than plumbing the elusive nature of *malachim*. What should students make of these celestial rovers? How does one comprehend the visitation of these wholly rational beings, Divine facilitators that roam effortlessly lighter than airy gossamer? At the root of the ambiguity lies the squaring of two irreconcilable assumptions. On

4. See *Tanchuma Lech Lecha* 20

the one hand, this narrative speaks of the wanderers in human terms. They walked, talked, sat, ate. Yet they also promised, predicted, pronounced. Were they, perhaps, enhanced telepaths or clairvoyants?

Indeed, some commentators called them prophets. This position is untenable because if such exalted humans existed, they too would have underwent *brit milah* and been introduced somewhere in *Bereshit*. *Malachim*, on the other hand, are incorporeal.

More evidence. One member of the travelling troupe member guaranteed his return the following year. No mortal knows whether he will live that long. Additionally, smiting Sedom with blindness, sparing Tzoar for Lot's sake, and destroying Jordan's plains are all acts of the Almighty or His messengers and not within a prophet's purview.

Reducing the *malachim*'s heavenly status and attributing human vesture capabilities to them smacks of ludicrous absurdity. Where did the flesh, tissue, bones and sinews come from? Where are these cherubs' parents? Did they piece themselves together with primordial elements? Did they *ex nihilo* pop into existence? Where did their bodies go when their impersonation ended? Were their discarded corpses ever discovered? Did their clothes rise to heaven in a clap of thunder?

Some commentators suggest that angels are ethereals who solidify within the visible spectrum when they so wish. A major snag is encountered in the stories of Elisha[5] and Daniyel[6] where the prophet perceived *malachim* and other lesser mortals did not. Whether these beings were corporeal or solid, anyone should have been able to see them.

Who then came to Avraham and Sarah's tent and what did they do there? Avraham (along with Sarah, Yaakov,[7] Lot,[8] Hagar,[9] and even Bilam's ass[10]) did see incorporeal *malachim*. Avraham was not delirious with pain, beset by high fever or in a state of an altered psychotic trip due to ingesting hallucinogenic plants when he beheld the three wanderers. But here is the catch. Avraham did not see them in reality. Instead, the patriarch *virtually* saw them. In all

5. *Melachim* II: 6:17
6. *Daniyel* 10:7
7. Chapter seven, seventh *aliyah*
8. See below, third *aliyah*
9. Chapter three, sixtn *aliyah*
10. *Bamidbar* 22:25

of the cases listed above the perceived figures or personas remained true to their incorporeal essence. As such they were incapable of being seen, but they appeared as real, tangible objects. Hashem projected or beamed three wanderers to visit Avraham's tent. If questioned, the couple would have adamantly attested to their presence. They got, so to speak, a private showing. And unless Hashem allowed others to witness the hologram, then "outsiders" would see nothing whatsoever of these intangibles.

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Before returning to Avraham's narrative, a brief excursus is in order. Throughout *Tanach* there were four distinct levels and ranges of prophecy at work. The highest or purest form was experienced by and through the intellect, pristine spirituality. The physical dimension played no part in the encounter. Moshe alone attained that level. Below that came heavenly communication through a combination of intellectual and imaginative faculties.[11] This type was bestowed upon the balance of *Tanach* prophets. The third kind only utilized sense perceptions to apprehend the prophetic vision, which was not, in reality, there. The Jewish Nation at Mount Sinai experienced this form of tangible prophecy when they beheld 'the appearance of the Glory of Hashem as a consuming fire atop the mountain.'[12] Note that in order to technically qualify as a heavenly message, prophetic impulses must have resonated from the prophet's *nefesh* (soul) and radiate, per se, to his imaginative and sense perceptions. However, if the message was the result of a hyperactive imagination caused by a pathology (high fever or epilepsy) then the phenomenon was not prophecy. Finally, the lowest type of heavenly communication was when prophetic inspiration was not bestowed upon the subject's intellect or imagination but experienced by sense perceptions only, a hologram of sorts. Hashem employed this type when the need arose to have non-prophets experience particular miraculous phenomena.[13]

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'And the Almighty appeared to him [Avraham] in Elonei Mamre as he sat at the tent entrance in the heat of the day. And he lifted his eyes and saw three

11. Imagery requires some physical reference point while intellect is more abstract.
12. *Shmot* 24:17
13. E.g. Elisha's attendant and Aram's king (*Melachim* II 6)

men standing about him. And he saw and ran to greet them at the tent's entrance bowing.' Based on the earlier introduction it can be understood that the patriarch experienced the third type of prophecy, channeled through his intellect and imagination to impression via his physical senses.

The Torah goes on to hint how Avraham began contemplating the real essence of his three visitors. As stated above, Avraham virtually experienced seeing the *malachim*. Yet, a few nagging inconsistencies confused him. He noted that at first he observed them when they were off in the distant horizon and hardly visible. However, in an inordinately short time, the three guests arrived at Avraham's doorstep. No signs of a mad dash or sprint. No winded runners.

Avraham second-guessed his sense perceptions, doubting their reliability and accuracy. He grasped that these men were not common folk but were cut of some incorporeal cloth. Excitedly, the patriarch ran, welcomed and beckoned them to grace his home with their presence. Requesting the honor of all three visitors to tarry a bit, the patriarch begged each one individually 'do not bypass your servant now.' Bearing the previous discussion of Avraham's constant broadband connection to Hashem in mind, the Sages[14] interpret the verse as addressed to the Almighty. The patriarch never logged off, as if beseeching Hashem to keep His chat window open even while Avraham attended to company.

Avraham initially suggested 'a little water for washing up and a short stop under a tree.' These modest suggestions made sense given the circumstances. Day had just barely dawned and detaining the eager travelers for more than a few minutes of freshening up was wholly unnecessary. Ordinarily, the patriarch would have ushered these wayfarers into his home but recall that his household members still reeled in pain. Relaxing under the tree provided a little more early morning comfort. Avraham recommended a hearty bread breakfast to provide energy for his guests' enervating travel day ahead. He understood that they wished to continue on their way and would not detain them for long.

The aristocratic callers accepted Avraham's offer, amicably telling the patriarch that his wish, if you will, was their command. Avraham hustled Sarah into high gear, telling her to personally sift the finest flour and prepare quick-baking *matzah* for the prestigious party.

14. BT *Shabbos* 127a

The recuperated host went all out. He ran to the cattle shed and selected a tender steer. Prime cuts of meat prepared to perfection were offered in no time flat. Culinary and health habits dictated serving the bread and dairy before the main meat course. An attendant youth served delicacies and cleared the dishes while the patriarch stood slightly distanced at their beck and call. The guests seemed accustomed to receiving regal treatment. Their aristocratic comportment further intimated to Avraham that his heavenly host company featured prominently in the spiritual seekers and shakers society.

While they were sampling the food, the notables courteously inquired after the house's matron, asking 'where is your wife Sarah?' Her absence had been conspicuous. Feigning curiosity they wondered to their host if she had fallen ill and needed their medical assistance. Avraham told them that 'she was inside the tent.' The terse retort suggested that she sat there in forlorn solitude. Had Sarah been a mother, she would have felt comfortable greeting the travelers accompanied by her child. Resolved not to tell her directly – in deference to her apparently deliberate absence – the senior guest announced Sarah's imminent pregnancy to her husband. 'Next year at this appointed time, I [*malach*] will return and Sarah will have delivered a child.' Interestingly enough, the Torah does not record the messenger's return visit. Perhaps the later verse 'and Hashem paid notice to Sarah'[15] implied heavenly assistance in her labor. Alternatively, the Sages[16] wrote that *malachim* "attended" the meal Avraham made when Yitzchak was born.

Sarah standing beyond view yet within earshot 'overheard [the tiding] from behind the tent's entrance.' She dismissed the *malachim*'s words, considering them nothing more than a friendly gesture and a token of appreciation for the warm hospitality. Hardly amused 'Sarah [inwardly] laughed' and disregarded the comment. 'After all', she mused, 'both of them were very old and she was postmenopausal.' Sarah reflected upon the aged couple's cessation of marital intimacy. Obviously under the circumstances reproduction could be ruled out altogether.

Sarah, who had not visually observed the guests, never contemplated their true heavenly identities. Before they took leave something peculiar bordering on catty occurs in the narrative. Concerning the matriarch's wistfulness

15. Fourth *aliyah* below
16. Cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 48:11

the *malachim* snitched on Sarah to her husband. '[Hashem's] *malachim* asked Avraham: "Why did [the announcement make] Sarah laugh saying 'how can I have a child at my age?' "'

The seeming inequity veritably jumps off the page. Had not Avraham also laughed when he heard the Divine promise of a son with Sarah? Is Sarah unfairly being singled out for chastisement? Recall that Avraham's reaction was not *if* but *how* would the aged couple have a child. After a moment's reflection, the patriarch concluded that Yitzchak would be their miracle child. Additionally, even if Avraham's levity can be deemed unworthy it can be overlooked as an innocuous "first-time" religious insensitivity and mistake. By comparison, after Hashem announced the imminent miracle to Avraham, it can be fairly assumed that he relayed the ecstatic news to Sarah. Besides, Avraham needed to tell Sarah about the *brit milah* commandment and its import for their expected progeny to be conceived in sanctity. Their respective name changes presaged the arrival of a little miracle bundle. Sarah thus heard the tidings now for a second time, and she should have known better than to question Divine omnipotence. 'Is there anything Hashem cannot do?' the *malach* challenged sternly.

Plainly the matriarch, despite her piety and enhanced prophetic powers, blundered. The transgression may be attributed to the Sages'[17] general observation as to a particular challenge women generally face in analytical, abstract thinking. The measured criticism of Sarah came because of her judgment error. She misread the big picture. Had Sarah observed her husband's cues, she would have better understood the guests' nature. The matriarch was accustomed to seeing Avraham characteristically and warmly welcoming visitors to their home. This outpouring of grace was markedly different. Sarah should have picked up on Avraham's bustle, deference, excitement, and intimidation. His demeanor and subservience bespoke visitors of a different caliber. In sum, Sarah muffed grasping the unfolding monumental scene. She failed to receive their tidings in the proper, Divine perspective. A heavenly blessing was mistaken for banal niceties.

17. BT *Shabbat* 33b

Second *aliyah*

'Frightened, Sarah demurred, asserting [to her husband]: "I did not laugh." He corrected her: "You did laugh."'

The brief epilogue is informative more in the abrupt absence of narrative than in actual text. After the laughter gaffe, a marital tiff ensued. Avraham rebuked his wife for her indifference to the guest's pronouncement. To Sarah's credit, rebuttals invoking menopause and marital abstinence stood at the tip of her tongue, but she preferred to sheepishly deny her misstep and take her lumps. Probably upon greater reflection she reconsidered her original thinking that caused her reaction. Thus the matter passed, avoiding unnecessary and superfluous exacerbation.

'The [heaven-sent] men stood [from the table] gazing towards Sedom as Avraham escorted them.' Apparently while the messengers began discussing Sedom's fate, they noticed their clinging host. Avraham did not realize that his presence inhibited and crimped their privacy as Mission Sedom went into operation. Innocently, the patriarch merely intended a long escort to accord them due respect. Rhetorically, 'Hashem asked [His messengers]: "Should I conceal the [Sedom] matter from Avraham?"' Hashem very much wanted Avraham in the Sedom decision-making process. The patriarch overheard Hashem say 'The cry [of the oppressed] in Sedom and Amorah is [too] much and their sin was [too] egregious. This requires closer [Divine] inspection.'

A heavenly war situation room mulled its options. If the reports proved accurate then Hashem would dispatch the wrecking *malachim* to eviscerate Sedom's entire region. But if after examination Sedom's crying victims exaggerated the criminal vice then Hashem would dispense a fitting punishment short of annihilation. 'And Avraham stood [overhearing] Hashem's conversation [with the *malachim*].' The patriarch stepped into a conversation he had not been invited to join. His opening salvo roared like cannon fire. 'He said: "Will the righteous be destroyed as the wicked?"'

An alternative interpretation of the passage reads as follows. After the first *malach* told of Sarah's imminent pregnancy and departed, two *malachim* remained. They stood up from the dining table, focusing exclusively on Sedom's direction and fate. Friendly table talk turned to a deadly discussion regarding obliterating Sedom. Until Avraham had overheard the destroyers, he had no prior knowledge of the fact that Sedom was tottering on the cusp.

Innocently, he had simply been accompanying his guests down the road. Humility and reticence prevented him from inquiring as to their destination and immediate plans. Rhetorically 'Hashem asked [Himself or His heavenly entourage]: "Should I conceal the [Sedom] matter from Avraham?"' This question triggered a prophecy to Avraham while he still escorted the two *malachim*. Hashem hastened His communique because these heavenly wreckers did not waste any time putting an evil eye on Sedom, locking the region in their crosshairs. Sedom had been targeted. Hashem signaled that Avraham should attend to prayer promptly.

Why did Hashem appear to be giving off mixed messages regarding Sedom? On the one hand, Hashem dispatched a heavenly hit squad to punish Sedom. Yet on the other hand Hashem apprised the patriarch of the developments, all but beckoning Avraham to stand up to these destroyers. Three aspects of Avraham's stakes in the Sedom saga shed light on this seeming ambiguity.

The narrative assumes a perspective that emphasizes the close bond of affection between Hashem and the patriarch. Withholding Sedom's secret would have been, in a manner of speaking, tantamount to betrayal of friendship.[18] Although the disclosure of confidential information is often a sign of low moral character,[19] that is true regarding one entrusted with *others'* private affairs.[20] Hashem wished to keep Avraham in the loop in respect to *His own* plans for Jordan's plains.

Hashem's disclosure sent a comforting message to the patriarch destined to 'wax great and populous.' Avraham should not err about Hashem's promise to his descendants. Heaven does not delight in building nations and empires just to overturn them. Hashem apprised Avraham of Sedom's sordid state of affairs that infiltrated an entire politico/socio/religious system. Avraham need not worry about empty or fickle promises. Sedom's saga would not repeat itself among the Jewish Nation if only a quorum of righteous existed. A detailed heavenly message, furthermore, informed Avraham of the situation's extreme case and consequences.

Hashem reminded the patriarch of the Divine Providence that marked the covenant. 'For I [Hashem] have known him [Avraham] so that he will command his sons and household after him to walk in Hashem's ways.' Detailing

18. See *Tehilliim* 55:15
19. See *Mishlei* 11:13; 20:19
20. Ibid. 25:9 – 'Reveal not the secret of others.'

Sedom's sins, in that sense, provided Avraham with an object lesson. The study of that sobering lesson would get passed down through generations and serve as the very best way to prevent a Sedom-styled slide.

Note a discrepancy between Avraham and Noach's predicaments. Hashem needed, per se, to tip Noach off since he lived among those targeted for devastation. Protecting Noach required ark preparations. In Avraham's case, Sedom's district was outside Avraham's border. Had Hashem not had those three reasons written above to consider then no prophecy would have taken place.

'And Hashem said: "The cry in Sedom and Amorah is [too] much and their sin was [too] egregious. This requires My descent and closer inspection."' A survey of usage and context of the phrase "Hashem's descent to the world" throughout *Tanach* yields four meanings:

- The subject may refer to the appearance of fire or light symbolizing a concentrated heavenly force in the world.
- It may indicate Hashem's Providence manifest in locations normally not accustomed to special treatment. For example Hashem's Providence accompanied the Jews to Egypt despite its pagan base.
- Hashem wants to grace and endow a prophetic spirit on a deserving individual.
- The term "descend" implies Divine wrath descending upon those pending punishment, as it does in the current Sedom narrative. Note that in *Parashat Noach*[21] the same verb choice was used for the Bavel Tower generation.

These verses introduce one of the most problematic and contentious passages in the Torah. The basic story line leaves readers totally baffled and bewildered. Consider: Sedom had been indicted in heaven for repeat offences and heinous crimes. Recessed, the heavenly tribunal decided to wait until Hashem had a final opportunity to "see the trouble up close." In the interim, interfering Sedom-defender Avraham attempted to thwart the pending guilty verdict citing extenuating circumstances. (I.e. bad things should not happen to good people within Sedom's borders. Therefore, toss the entire case out.)

Major Jewish medieval thinkers have grappled with this seeming conflict of free-choice versus Hashem's knowledge. If Hashem's knowledge is perfect

21. Chapter two, seventh *aliyah*

then why did the Almighty have to 'take a closer look?' Had Hashem not already considered *all* material facts and factors? Known Sedom's fate? Sealed it? And alternatively if Hashem had determined a guilty verdict, what point is there to the patriarch's vigorous defense let alone the option for Sedom's citizens to repent and thereby void an evil decree?

The Rambam[22] offers a five-point philosophic approach to the abstruse subject of Hashem's knowledge. Indeed, this topic has riveted minds from the patriarch's time throughout the millennia. The Sages included it as one of the classic, pithy teachings in *Ethics of our Fathers*: "All is foreseen [by Hashem] and yet [man's] free-will persists."[23]

In Sedom's case, the Torah writes that Hashem seemingly roamed the area searching for fresh information. For the present purpose of getting at the plain understanding the following suffices: the verse is to be read strictly from a human perspective (which by definition is vastly incomplete, inadequate and unbridgeable with regards to Divine wisdom). From man's vantage, Hashem's earthly visit corresponds to how *human beings* understand Hashem's tribunal workings in the world. People project that the Almighty Arbiter gathered objective evidence before passing judgment.

Alternatively, the verse reads as an invitation to Avraham to intercede on Sedom's behalf. In reality, Avraham's advocacy would not figure prominently with regards to Sedom's fate. There would be no stay, no righteous quorum saving the towns, and of course the Omniscient One knew all that very well. It was a done deal. But the salient facts about Sedom, including a foregone conclusion of its upheaval, were not relayed to Avraham. Hashem wanted to give Avraham ample opportunity to beseech Heaven on behalf of Sedom so that the patriarch would internalize the Almighty's propensity to do kindness. Patiently allowing Avraham to exhaust a meaningful public defense taught him just how far Divine compassion goes. The Almighty consistently conceded an ever-dwindling quorum that could stay the execution of Sedom's entire district despite 'their weighty sin.' The patriarch etched this eternal lesson into his descendants' psyche for posterity.

A third approach to the verse suggests that the Divine descent and reconnaissance refers to a *malach* dispatch. Sedom had written selfish isolationism

22. *Moreh Nevuchim* III:20
23. *Mishnah Avot* 3:15

into law. No alms collecting, no trespassing. The cry was the tears of poor, hapless victims fobbed off with false promises. The well-heeled trampled on the *miserables* with impunity. An overwhelming majority of the population had not a trace of decency left. Decay rotted their last remnants of it. The *malachim* were sent to test whether toxic xenophobic legislation was merely statutory. Pretending to be wayfarers, they subjected themselves to Sedom magistrates' mercy. The *malachim*'s insistence to sleep outdoors evoked a total consensus among Sedom's hysteric masses. It proved how fanatically the locals had adhered to the letter of the law:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PUNISHED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT

The *malachim* found out that being a stranger in Sedom was a federal case. In contradistinction to Hashem's knowledge, it was legitimate for the *malachim* to 'descend and walk around in order to get a closer look.' Information is imparted or withheld from them by Divine design.

Unlike Sedom, the flood generation's sins did not necessitate *malachim* visitors. That generation's transgressions centered on outright violent crimes, burglary, and theft. Telltale smut lurked on every street corner. Not so with Sedom's charge sheet. Often legislation is a product of seedy politicians, backed by reactionary or hyper-activist courts out of touch with Main Street. Only by strolling the boulevard could the *malachim* put a finger on the pulse, so to speak. Sedom's sting operation, in fact, proved their stinking suspicions correct.

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These *malachim* noticed Avraham's concentrated prophetic state, intently wired to Hashem's message presaging Sedom's doom. They departed without exchanging traditional farewell courtesies to their welcoming host, thinking it best not to disturb his meditation. While the post-*brit milah* patriarch had achieved an ability to hold Divine communication simultaneous with mundane activities, it was understood that some distraction impaired and diminished Heaven's frequency. Interestingly, the wrecker *malachim* refrained from interrupting Avraham because they were essentially benevolent and very much wanted Avraham's entreaties to succeed so that Sedom would be spared.

'And the men turned from there making their way to Sedom as Avraham stood in Hashem's presence.' It did not take Avraham long to realize that these *malachim* had gone. Probably he noticed shortly after being apprised by

Hashem that Sedom had crossed red lines. Without *malach*-guests to further serve, Avraham turned his full attention to saving Sedom. 'And Avraham approached [the heavenly bench], accusing: "And will Your anger wipe away the righteous with the evil?"'

The discussion now turns to address a fundamental question: What was Sedom's cardinal sin that slated the district for a holocaust? As written above, the crime witnessed and experienced by these *malachim* confirmed the allegation and charge that the district's milieu all too accurately reflected their laws. Sedom had lopped off the last vestiges of basic civility, rendering its citizens barely recognizable as human beings.

Contrasting Sedom with Binyamin's Givah scandal[24] reveals differences and brings readers a step closer to cracking Sedom's nut. Since both seemingly involved sexual immorality and laxity, why did Sedom get reamed, while Givah was redeemed?

Clues are often best provided by reflecting upon the nature of the punishment since Hashem's justice is meted out measure for measure. Hashem transformed Sedom into a salty, smoking arid wasteland. The very nucleus of Sedom's problem lay in the land. Specifically, the region prided itself on its area's fertility; an oasis produced prolifically. Agriculture prospered. The Midas touch permeated. Naturally this generated fantabulous wealth for its citizens. Quicksilver blaring headlines, motored by flashy conspicuous consumption, hollered. Soon the region's borders attracted attention. Lots of attention. Entrepreneurs, speculators and such streamed in. Migrants, laborers and the like followed. Everyone clamored for a piece of the action. Stragglers and beggars held out their hopeful hands for a handout, a piece of pita.

Sedom's seams burst. At least the locals thought they had. They shuddered to think that some of their loot may have to be shared. The State leaders rammed isolationist and reactionary legislature. "Shut and bar the gates; toss out newcomers; just say scram!" Such slogans rang loud and clear from the soapboxes from where pedigreed Sedomites pontificated. They said "no" to sharing opportunity; "no way" to charity. Subject to summary property snatching and forced sodomy, rounded up and chucked out, those without the proper credentials or *protekzia* got a blunt message. "Don't even think about coming back," the locals jeered.

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24. *Shoftim* 19

Sedom's punishment should be seen in perspective and not as excessive. Since it fell within Israel's borders and Avraham's jurisdiction, it had been judged accordingly. Hashem abhors unethical behavior. Violent crime and sexual laxity rank highest. Add to a general impropriety the fact of perversity that took place within Israel and an obvious observation surfaces: *the land* vomited Sedom and the Sedomites out. Similarly, in Yehoshua's time the land spit out the Canaanites for shared reasons.

Returning to our fundamental question: Why was Givah not given a similar punishment? Had both places not been rocked by violence and sex scandals? And, of course, no leniency should have been granted to Givah out of jurisdiction technicalities; both are inside Israel. Four distinctions emerge.

Sedom enshrined their perversion with legislation expressly designed to humiliate and drive away the poor and needy. Since this aim was shared by society, Sedom's communities were punished with upheaval. Givah never codified such laws.

Sedom's abominations received socio-religious legitimacy. While Givah's shame cannot be whitewashed as a teenage prank, it certainly cannot be advanced that sexual immorality ran rampant. It didn't. The shocking Givah gang-rape and manslaughter occurred once and was an isolated event. Hebrew distinguishes between turpitude motivated by a spontaneous impulse (*chotei*) versus a wrong that is willful, premeditated, and rationalized (*rasha*). The latter is more severe and dangerous, with tremendous ramifications for repentance. Remorse can help bring about catharsis in the individual or community that acknowledges human weaknesses and challenges. By contrast, unbridled and undisciplined behavior parading as newly accepted norms does not display remorse.

Third, in Sedom's situation the verses demonstrate how an animalistic attitude permeated an entire town. In Givah, only a few rowdy lowlifes participated in the despicable act.

Givah's egregious sexual obsession was sated and subdued as it lusted after one man's concubine. Sedom's libido was not content with raping Lot's daughters. The locals hounded Lot to deliver them his visiting male guests for buggery. Sedom was obviously very serious about maintaining a zero tolerance stranger policy.

These four differences, then, make it clear why Sedom received a substantially greater punishment than Givah. On occasion, railing prophets lambasted

Jewish deviance and defiance, derogatorily calling them Sedomites. Yirmiyahu admonished his co-religionists, exclaiming that Jewish sin exceeded Sedom's transgressions.[25]

Given the Almighty's disgust toward Sedom, a name forever associated with sexual deviance, what compelled Avraham to pray for its residents' welfare let alone vigorously defend them? 'And Avraham approached [the heavenly bench], accusing: "Will Your anger wipe away the righteous with the evil?"' From the moment Hashem had confided to the patriarch that Sedom was slated for devastation, Avraham galvanized himself. Zealously he became a man with a mission. The patriarch focused on Sedom's innocent victims. Were Lot and his family not Sedom residents? Avraham stressed that Divine anger played a lion's share in threatening a wanton annihilation. An indiscriminate destruction of Sedom's inhabitants would not be just. Punishing the righteous would be wrath run amok.

The forefather forwarded a second angle of defense. 'Perhaps fifty innocent reside within the city.' That is, not only should the righteous be evacuated but the entire writ of execution should be stayed. Avraham posited that the merit of so many pious people should protect an entire city from harm. While the patriarch appreciated the legitimacy of majority rule, Sedom's case should be viewed differently. Why? Given that the righteous would be spared, the impact of all their relatives and neighbors being killed would be devastating. Destroying an entire region effectively spelled untold hardship if not outright demise for the survivors. This, in fact, had been Hashem's complaint to Yonah regarding preserving Ninveh. 'Should I [Hashem] not pity large Ninveh whose population contains more than twelve myriads for the sake of those [young ones] who cannot distinguish between their right and left?'[26]

Avraham's courtroom strategy chosen, he charged. 'Far be it from You to do this, killing righteous together with the wicked.' Accusing the Almighty of flubbing a case would be audacious enough. He went further. Avraham seemingly put everything on the line. If Hashem, in a manner of speech, could not be relied upon to judge fairly, then why walk in the Maker's ways? "Righteous and wicked – it's all the same." The patriarch's charge amounted to no less than a mockery of good/evil and reward/punishment.

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25. *Eichah* 4:6
26. *Yonah* 4:11

Avraham plotted for the defense, and continued his second line offensive to grant general clemency for the sake of fifty pious. After all, if fifty survived but, heaven forbid, lost beloved family members, best friends, and old neighbors, then there would be no real comfort. Heavenly largesse means saving everybody on account of those truly righteous.

Could the fifty righteous be dispersed through all five townships in Sedom's district? Likely, the patriarch only cared deeply about Sedom because of Lot and his family. Despite Hashem's response grouping Sedom together with the other four cities, Avraham had focused his sight. 'Maybe there are fifty righteous within *the city*.'

Was Abraham's arrival at fifty a random choice? Invoking fifty had been well calculated since holy mysteries surround that number's associations. Consider: it is the number of Divine facilitators (*malachim*) that play crucial roles in the world. Fifty years makes up the jubilee cycle[27] that invokes rejuvenating calls of freedom and renewal. The levites worked in the *mikdash* until the age of fifty.[28] These few examples suggest that the patriarch's arguments were carefully crafted. Also note that Avraham's opening remarks lacked any trace of reticence, humility and finesse that characterize the later developments in the Sedom trial. That is because he reasoned that fifty pious would carry the day even if a verdict was handed down based on strict justice and not Divine mercy. Astutely, Avraham determined a strategy that began with justice. He could appeal later (should the need arise) on the grounds of Divine kindness.

The heavenly prosecutors acceded to the defense's two pleas. 'Hashem said: "If I find fifty pious in Sedom City, then I will be prepared to spare the entire region on their merit."' Divine magnanimity allowed that fifty in Sedom proper – as Avraham suggested – could release all five townships from death sentences. Using fifty as a negotiator's anchor figure, the patriarch then played off that established base. 'Avraham answered saying, "I hereby begin to plead though (I fully realize) that I am insignificant as dust, earth."' This meek-mannered transformation introduced softened tones. Taking his cue from Hashem's lenient calculus, Avraham commenced a new line of defense, with mercy invoked where justice failed. The defense counsel asked if nine *per town* plus His lowly servant (the patriarch himself) would save the *entire*

27. *Vayikra* 25:10
28. *Bamidbar* 8:25

Greater Sedom region. Considering the alternative, missing five seemed a trifle. 'Forty five (without you) would spare it all from calamity.' 'Forty?' 'I'll refrain from doing it for forty's sake.' No annihilation in that case, but some other form of punishment would be meted out.

As the good-faith negotiations grew protracted, Avraham's style and tone varied. When the variance appeared moderate (fifty, forty five, forty), it represented small increments if looked at from a per city basis. Accordingly, Avraham did not humble himself exceedingly. However, when Avraham came down from forty to thirty he apologized profusely for his impudence. Twenty five percent was not incremental but a radical departure from the sums previously agreed upon.

Moving from thirty to twenty, Avraham hit the reset button again. He realized that lowering the bar for the pious populace necessitated revising the original plans of saving the five municipalities. Sedom alone hung in the balance. In light of the new equation, Hashem informed the counsel that twenty in Sedom would spare it from any and all harmful consequences.

Avraham played his last hand. He begged to preserve Sedom if ten righteous could be found. Hashem answered 'I won't destroy on the merit of ten.' The patriarch thought that Lot, his wife, sons, daughters and in-laws comprised a winning quorum. Obviously he was nervous about the offer since it represented a fifty percent deviation from the formerly agreed upon twenty. At that point the patriarch's prophecy left him. Gavel lowered, the case closed in favor of the prosecution. *All rise!* 'And the Almighty departed when He finished speaking to Avraham. Avraham returned to his place.' Surely the place referred to his prior spiritual level of sub-prophetic close attunement to Hashem.

It should be understood that Avraham for the defense chose his strategy well. These numbers were not random but rather fifty, forty, thirty etc. contained great significance. As mentioned above, fifty evoked mysticism. (Forty five was important to show that missing one pious person per each of the five cities should not bear such calamitous ramifications.) Forty is the number of days that it takes for a fertilized ovum to develop into an embryo carrying the status of a human life.[29] The number is also pregnant with holiness because on three separate occasions, Moshe ascended Mount Sinai for

29. BT *Bechorot* 21b

that amount of days and nights. Furthermore, after forty rainy days, the flood waters ceased crashing upon earth and its peoples and thus began a time ushering in Divine mercy.

Thirty evoked esoteric connotations, too. Consider Hashem's world compartmentalized by threes – spiritual, heavenly and earthly. Delving deeper into the spiritual world, there are ten levels of *malachim* or heavenly facilitators. The heavens have ten orbit systems ("wheels"). Earth is said to comprise ten components – form and matter (which subdivides into four elements and the four levels of existence forged from them: inanimate, plant, animal, human). All counted, thirty represented the universe's thirty sub-parts of the spiritual, heavenly and earthly worlds.

Twenty followed. That integer corresponded to the ten generations from Adam to Noach plus another ten from Noach to Avraham. The patriarch pinned his hopes of saving Lot and Sedom on the merit of those twenty righteous standouts. Ten concluded the circuitous trek from fifty. That number symbolized the microcosms of vitality. The Sages[30] teach that communal prayers cannot be invoked where a quorum of ten is absent for that unit (minimally) defines a congregation.

Throughout all of the patriarch's wildly shifting pleas, Hashem listened patiently. The Almighty accepted each new turn, each new term. No stone was left unturned in trying to avert the upending of the Jordan Plain's citizenry. Clearly, Sedom's deserts were just. Avraham may have never known that from the outset, Hashem had decided to rescue Lot on account of his righteousness in comparison to his fellow Sedomite countrymen.

Third *aliyah*

'And the two malachim came to Sedom in the evening. Lot was sitting at Sedom's gate and Lot saw, getting up to greet them, prostrating.'

Immediately after Hashem finished speaking with Avraham, the two *malachim* arrived in Sedom. Throughout this passage *malachim* are called "men" with only two exceptions: when they arrived in Sedom, and also as they urged Lot to hightail it out of Sedom before the fiery sulfur incinerated him. That is

30. BT *Megillah* 23b

because Hashem had two specific purposes in sending these *malachim*. First, they needed to scout around Sedom to determine the facts on the ground. How atrociously sociopathic had Main Street stooped? Second, the Divine agents' mercy mission rescued Lot. Heavenly agents are touted as such when involved in their duties.

Alternatively, the reference to *malachim* here is on account of the bullet-train pace it took the *malachim* to arrive in Sedom from their Elonei Mamre departure point. The miles they devoured in a few hours would take mere mortals days.

'Lot was sitting at Sedom's gates.' In *Tanach,* city gates denote sitting in judgment.[31] The Sages[32] explain that Lot had only recently been appointed to serve on the court. Spotting distinguished looking visitors, Lot stood to greet them. Note that three *malachim* had embarked on the Avraham/Sarah mission yet now only two continued and arrived in Sedom. After one announced Yitzchak's birth, he departed.

'He (Lot) said: "My masters, now do come to your servant's house. Sleep and wash up before leaving in the morning."' Lot alerted these newcomers that by strolling around Sedom great danger lurked. He figured that his judgeship afforded these men safe passage, diplomatic immunity.

Lot's thrust was to get these visitors off the streets as soon as possible. Clearly he wanted to minimize their visibility to Sedom's vigilantes. If possible, Lot would hustle his guests out before daybreak. Lot's plan clashed with their own. 'They refused, saying "No. We will be lodging outdoors."' How otherwise could they gauge the burg's beat? Unknowing of Hashem's aim, Lot persisted until he won them over and brought them to his house. 'He (Lot) made them a repast and baked *matzot*. They ate.' The guests' evening arrival dictated hasty meal preparations. A flat bread substitute baked from unleavened dough sufficed. In comparison to the sumptuous spread that Avraham had served, Lot's meal paled. Nothing is written about what his menu included.

'Before retiring for the night, townspeople, men of Sedom surrounded the house.' Men old and young cornered Lot's home, sealing off the exits. 'They called out to Lot saying: "Where are the men who came to you tonight?"' The locals meant trouble. They certainly were not prepared to wait until morning

31. E.g. *Devarim* 17:1,5
32. *Bereshit Rabbah* 50:3

to force sex upon these two men. Zealous Sedom's folks acted with alacrity when it came to dressing down, degrading, and humiliating strangers. The faster word got around about Sedom's civil standard deviation, the better the deterrent.

'Lot went out the door, closing it after him.' He begged forbearance. Actually he proposed a trade. If his neighbors would leave these male guests alone, Lot would compromise his two virgin daughters for their orgy. Judge Lot determined that the people's gripe for harboring guests lay with him since he had broken the law by hosting them. The visitors did not know about Sedom's jurisprudence. By proposing to sacrifice his virgin daughters' chastity and his own humiliation, Lot would pay dearly enough to Sedom society.

Lot's questionable ploy, while sickeningly offensive, was actually a clever gambit. Since Lot's married daughters' husbands were in the pack of slithering wolf whistlers, he bet that the mob would be discouraged from touching the young girls who were their sisters-in-law. Why? The married sisters could be counted on to stop their husbands' galloping libidos. Assuming this tactic would stall the sons-in-law's designs, a different dynamic might derail things. Lot hoped to stir enough commotion and confusion to sneak the men quietly out of town.

Trying to capitalize on his respected judgeship status, Lot demanded to spare the visitors 'since they found refuge under my roof.' Humiliating guests would be a slap in Lot's face amounting to the equivalent of stripping his diplomatic immunity. This assertion of his personal domain as having consular status, if not being an outright embassy, had been a brilliant stroke. Together with an offer to give over his virgin daughters, it showed the great lengths Lot was willing to go in order to protect the men, and guard his honor.

Good plan, bad neighbors. Negotiations and diplomacy were wasted on salacious Sedom from the outset. Their ethical blindness scuttled all deals. 'Move aside,' the citizens demanded from Lot. 'A man comes to reside among us' they clamored 'and now sits in judgment.' Their condemning message rang loud and clear. Fired and frenzied, these raunchy rowdies imploded. To their minds, Lot did not warrant immunity. He was no governor of theirs. Moreover they hollered 'now we're going to manhandle you worse than them.'

Alternatively, the shouting might have been rhetorical. That is, these people may have actually viewed him as a magistrate worthy of respect. If so,

they asked: 'Since you have been singled out among us, why would we harm you over them?'

The *malachim*, assuming the appearance of men, 'stretched out their arms, bringing Lot inside the house and closed the door.' They snatched Lot, sparing their host sexual abuse at the hands of the depraved hordes. Next, these *malachim* 'whacked those men who stood at the house's doorway, blinding them.' This neutralized the attackers. Completing the assessment of Sedom's true colors, the *malachim* turned to Lot. They asked Lot 'who else is here with you?' The rescue and evacuation operation for Lot and his immediate family segued into full gear. It did not take longwinded explanations for Lot to comprehend that Sedom held no future for him. He had experienced enough. They warned him to get out 'because we are here to destroy the place.' The Torah writes that both *malachim* took part in terminating Sedom. This does not contradict the Sages'[33] statement that one *malach* destroyed while the other saved Lot. Since Lot's presence impeded the demolition, clearing Lot out doubled as an act of havoc. Similarly, both *malachim* prodded Lot to leave. Removing a critical support beam is tantamount to operating a wrecking ball.

Lot was told the lurid details about the place where he resided. The cruelty and abuse heaped on the poor and needy sealed Sedom's fate. Lot scurried over to his married daughters' families, warning of Sedom's imminent fall. They scoffed. 'But the sons-in-law thought it (the threat) to be a joke' failing to comprehend Lot's message; they were in denial. They stayed behind, buried in smoldering Sedom soot.

As soon as morning broke, the *malachim* – so called because they were foretelling the future – gave Lot a final push. 'Get up. Take your wife and daughters who live with you. Otherwise you'll perish in the city's iniquity.' The married daughters were not given another chance on account of their cynical husbands' cavalier attitude. The *malachim* explained that by staying back Lot would not be spared because, at times, calamity does not distinguish between righteous and wicked.[34] Instead a majority dictates a place's fate and balance.[35]

Lot was literally paralyzed with fear. 'He went catatonic. The men grabbed Lot's hand, wife's hand and daughters' hands.' Whisking them out of doomed Sedom, they stopped only when they were well out of town. Impressing Lot

33. *Bereshit Rabbah* 50:2
34. BT *Bava Kamma* 60a
35. BT *Sanhedrin* 111b

with the urgency of the matter was meant to evoke a desperate plea of mercy for Tzoar. The terrified refugee along with his daughters would complete a quorum of ten righteous people in that small town (there were a pious handful living in Tzoar) and Avraham had elicited a Divine stay of execution for one town with that number of pious. Nevertheless, the Torah spells out clearly that Lot's wife and daughters had insufficient personal merit to be rescued from Sedom. Only 'by Hashem's compassion for him (Lot)' were they evacuated.

The Sages[36] took it further, teaching that Lot's wife had been responsible for the townspeople's furor. When Lot brought the guests home she knocked on neighbors' doors asking for salt to accommodate strangers. In Sedom, the slightest mention of guests was fighting words, and Lot's wife knew it. It quickly got folks buzzing, riled, and sizzling. The shifty hag got her comeuppance when she later turned into a salt pillar.[37]

The savior *malach* instructed Lot 'run for your life. Do not look back and do not stay anywhere in the [Sedom] district. Flee to the mountain otherwise you'll perish.' Only Lot had communicated with the *malach*. His wife and daughters were not privy to the Divine plan. Why did the *malach* forbid looking back?

Lot learned that he could not take his livestock and other valuable assets. The emphasis rested on the plan to rescue life and limb. The *malachim* hoped to soften Lot's ruin, advising him to let go of what he could not hope to hold on to. He must come to grips with his vast wealth going up in Sedom's smoke, and his married daughters who were no more. Thus the directive should be understood not as a prohibition as much as wise, kind counsel. Lot did have license to watch Sedom's pyrotechnics since the devastation was an apt punishment for the region's cruelty and polar social frigidity.

Lot grasped the evolving scene and did not bother appealing Divine decrees. Practically, though, he asked for special personal dispensation saying 'I cannot escape (all the way) to the mountain (at this pace).' Lot begged to settle in the nearby town of Tzoar. It may have technically shared Sedom's unbridled greed and passions, but Lot reasoned that due to its small size and population, things had not spiraled out of control there.

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36. *Bereshit Rabbah* 51:5
37. See the next *aliyah*

Fourth *aliyah*

'And he (the malach) said to him
that he would accept the suggestion
and that the town (Tzoar) would not be devastated.'

Recall that a total of three *malachim* had been entrusted to deliver birth tidings to Avraham and Sarah, evacuate Lot and destroy Greater Sedom. After announcing Yitzchak's birth, the first *malach* departed. Two *malachim* remained who shared two unfinished, interrelated jobs. The singular ('he said') that introduces this fourth *aliyah*, then, should be understood as *both malachim* speaking to Lot as one, telling him of their consent to spare Tzoar.

A question arises: if Hashem decreed Tzoar's destruction as part of the Sedom district fate, could heavenly agents (*malachim*) override it? Was newly founded Tzoar not slated for upheaval as a Sedom bedroom community? Recall that Hashem accepted Avraham's final plea to save Sedom if ten righteous existed. Without gerrymandering, Tzoar would meet that target if Lot were to take up residence there since he completed the quorum. Thus, the *malachim*'s apparent reversal of Hashem's decree was actually a fulfillment of it.

'The sun went out over the land as Lot came to Tzoar.' The Torah pegged Lot's arrival and Sedom's fall to a precise time – high noon – for several reasons. First, the verse teaches the close proximity of Tzoar to Sedom. Lot exited Sedom at sunrise. By midday Lot had arrived in Tzoar. Second, on the day when 'Hashem rained down on Sedom,' it was not typical precipitation with overcast skies, storm clouds. In fact, the Torah describes a clear sunny day. 'Hashem rained fire and brimstone on Sedom and Amorah. From heaven, it came from the Almighty.' They were formed in a higher atmospheric heaven, resembling Egypt's hail plague where the Torah describes fire emanating from within slushy condensation. Fire and sulfur torrents from heaven were blatantly supernatural occurrences.

'He [Hashem] overturned the cities.' Divine wrath flipped Greater Sedom so to speak, on its head. A 180° turnabout. Its once flowering, fertile fields failed to produce. Golden and rolling hills, lush and plush landscapes, verdant and voluptuous vineyards suddenly grew wrinkled, withered. Suffocated and sapped of all vitality, a green oasis browned. The upheaval struck at the root. Balmy and breathtaking Sedom curled into a ball, disappeared.

As for Lot's wife? 'And his wife glanced behind him and became a pillar of salt.' As mentioned, the *malach*'s directive was not intended as a prohibition but an advisory. Gently, the *malach* told Lot to try and come to terms with his personal and financial losses. Magnate Lot's wife refused. Defiantly she turned, rushed back past the cordoned off destruction site. Reentering the badlands she eyed ways to smuggle contraband out. When the blight visited, she joined her fellow country folk's fate, perishing together with them. She blended with Sedom's salt dunes and ruins.

'Avraham woke early [going] to the place where he had stood facing Hashem. He looked over towards Sedom and Amorah and over the entire region.' Remember that though the patriarch toiled in prayer to save Sedom, he had no way of knowing if his petitions had been answered. His heart ached, longing to know the outcome. Waking up before sunrise, the patriarch resumed his prior meditative thoughts and union with the Creator. Concentrating on Sedom, 'his mind's eye caught glimpse of rising smoke like the smoke of a kiln.' As if an eyewitness, Avraham beheld ghoulish prophetic images. Smoldering flames, ashes, death's muffled cries. Out of the ruins, walked a man's shadowy figure. On Avraham's merit, Lot was spared and a doting uncle's heart sighed relief. Lot escaped due to Avraham. He had, after all, abandoned Avraham, having thrown his lot in with Sedom's deviance.

'Lot went up from Tzoar, he and both of his daughters and dwelled in the mountain since he feared to live in Tzoar. And so he stayed in the cave with his two daughters.' Lot steered far from city life that Tzoar offered, fully expecting it to share Sedom's mayhem. Despite the *malach*'s assurances to the contrary, Lot reasoned that the town's stay of execution would not hold out for long. He was even anxious that setting up tent on the surrounding mountains would leave him exposed to fire and sulfur debris – secondary smoke. Holing up in a cavern seemed like his safest refuge. Really, Lot would have wanted to rejoin Avraham. It was not a fear of rejection that held him back – he knew full well that his uncle had put his life on the line in rescuing him from the four kings. It was shame. Realizing the Neanderthal folly of abandoning Avraham for what was now a withered wasteland, he simply could not face the uncle he jilted. Lot aged into a miserable, broken, bitter cave man.

Shortly, Lot's life plummeted into prurience. He clung to his remaining family – his two daughters. Lot convinced them that Tzoar was destroyed

upon his departure. He sold them on the idea that the world had experienced a diluvial apocalypse and forbade them to leave the grotto and have a look around, waving the specter of a repeat of their mother's saline dissolution. Lot overtly contributed to the sisters' sense of despair, hopelessness, desperation. For their part, the ditzy daughters danced to their father's clumsy tango. 'And the older (daughter) told the younger one: "Our father is old. And there is no man on earth to have intercourse with us. Let us get father drunk on wine and we will lay with him."' These gullible girls were convinced that humanity's repopulation rested with them.

An alternative reading of the verse suggests that Lot's daughters were aware of human life beyond Sedom's "burbs," but were under the impression that everyone was just as debauched as the Sedomites. Only their father might engage in normal reproductive intercourse.

The Sages'[38] ambivalence regarding this family's incest was recorded for posterity. The bizarre upshot came down to muted praise for the daughters' discretion blended with disgust, recoil. As the wholly unnatural pregnancies progressed, the family undoubtedly learned the truth. The cataclysm had been devastating but contained. Sedom's situation, to be sure, created strange facts on the ground. The daughters, while active participants in incest, honestly believed they were doing an admirable thing. While one was more discreet than the other it does not detract from their mitigating mistake. 'And the older (daughter) gave birth and she called his name Moav (of my father)...and the younger also had a boy and she called his name Ben Ami (of my nation).'

The verse, indirectly, answers a question. Did Lot know that he had committed the ultimate taboo? The Torah places a dot over the last word in the verse 'and he did not know when she (the older daughter) lied down or when she *arose*.' After the encounter, he did have a vague sense of what had happened. The younger sibling's discretion was such that Lot had no inkling.

A queer epilogue apprises readers of Moav and Amon's origins and blood kinship with *Bnei* Yisrael. The Torah proscribing their progeny from fully joining Jewish ranks 'because they failed to greet you (Jews) with bread and water'[39] makes eminent sense. The callous treatment of relatives is eternally unforgivable.

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38. BT *Nazir* 23b; *Horayot* 10b
39. *Devarim* 23:5

'And Avraham travelled the land southwards, settling between Kadesh and Shur. And he dwelled in Gerar.' Immediately after Sedom's fall, the patriarch packed up his family and travelled south. What motivated his leaving Elonei Mamre? First, given its proximity to salt-dune Sedom, it is likely that Avraham could not shake the painful associations with a place that caused personal and financial ruin to Lot. Second, Sedom's destruction deeply impacted the neighboring areas because it had been a veritable bread belt and staple commodities backbone. The patriarch's cupboards were bare. Avraham hoped that Azah (a major Gerar city) would lift his sagging spirits and provide good pasture. A third reason could be that concomitant with his circumcision came a name change. As long as the patriarch dwelled among old friends and neighbors, his old name would be harder to shake. Starting over in Azah meant implementing a new name, new identity. The Sages[40] attributed Avraham's move to a decreased opportunity to host wayfarers or perhaps out of a desire to distance himself from disgraced Lot after word got out about his incestuous flings.

'And Avraham said regarding Sarah his wife that she was his sister.' Avraham had not had any involvement with Azah, so he decided to play it safe. He repeated the ruse about Sarah being his sister out of a nagging fear that Azans would have less compunction killing her husband – an insurmountable obstacle to their designs – than doing away with her brother. At ninety, one wonders what physical attraction the aging matriarch still inspired. Hashem must have caused Sarah to regain her youthful verve and beauty after being told that she would have a baby with Avraham. This underscored the *malach's* sharp words to her in the beginning of this *parashah*: 'Is there anything Hashem cannot do?'

Consequently, Azans admired and gawked at Sarah's renewed youthfulness until it landed her in King Avimelech's palace harem. In addition to looks, the king likely found her alluring on account of her being the patriarch's "sister." While there were obvious similarities between the Egyptian and Azan sojourns, there was a fundamental difference, too. Hashem had little interest in Avraham remaining long in Egypt and so the visitation of an unseemly disease upon Paroah and his household hit the right chord. Paroah hastened Avraham's departure and the enmity caused by the whole sordid affair effectively dampened a possible *detente*.

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40. *Bereshit Rabbah* 52:1,4

Not so with Avimelech. Hashem desired a protracted Azah visit for Avraham. For that reason it was crucial not to breach or sour a budding relationship. Accordingly, Hashem tempered the punishment for stealing Avraham's wife. No plague afflicted the palace. 'And Hashem came to Avimelech in a dream warning death for snatching the married woman.' A Divine dream put the king on notice that Avraham was a prophet. It revealed Avraham's true dignity, signaling the undertones of visiting royalty. Avimelech spread word throughout his kingdom, thus lending more prestige to the storied visitors. Though the heavenly communication could have preceded Sarah's abduction and tabled the trauma altogether, Hashem desired a particular effect that would further enhance the patriarch's persona. Dream texting did the job.

Interesting, also, were the changes that had taken place within Avraham's own personal growth. In Egypt, Avraham had only recently commenced his spiritual quest. Despite being far from a religious neophyte, advanced Divine communication had still eluded him. Two major covenantal experiences (the severed-animal sacrifice and circumcision) catapulted the patriarch. Testimony to Avraham's new stature found its expression in innumerable ways. Consider, for example, that unprepared and undeserving Avimelech experienced Hashem in a way totally out of his league. This provides another explanation for the contrast between Avimelech and Paroah. In Egypt, since Avraham had not yet reached high spiritual levels it was not possible to grant Paroah a heaven-sent dream. Instead, the Egyptian monarch's designs had to be foiled by way of pus-filled body scabs and oozing sores. Not so after two covenants. Hagar earlier and Avimelech presently scored religious mind-altering communiqués as a direct result of the patriarch's expanded merit.

The Almighty outfitted Avimelech with a one-piece orange jumpsuit and white slip-on sneakers: 'Death for snatching the married woman.' Two offenses warranted capital punishment. First, Avimelech took a woman by force. Second, Sarah was married. Kidnapping and adultery both appear on the list of Seven Noahide Laws punishable by death.[41]

The Torah is clear that the king had not laid a finger on Sarah as it writes 'and Avimelech did not get close to her.' One therefore might have expected the Gerarite ruler to protest the death sentence on those grounds. But Avimelech, feeling framed, had an even better hand to play. He fired back defiantly. 'And

41. See BT *Sanhedrin* 58b. See chapter eight, footnote 30 for a full listing.

he (Avimelech) said to Hashem: "And will You kill an innocent *nation*?"' Were You to kill me for this, I charge that You might wipe out an innocent nation as well. The king's retort stemmed from the legal procedure of Noahide marriage. That is, matrimony rested on mutual oral consent; divorce on mutual oral separation (without a writ of divorce).[42] The king reasoned that since Avraham and Sarah both told him that they were siblings it could be construed as intent to split. Even had Avimelech slept with Sarah (which he didn't), there would have been no theoretical culpability for adultery.

Hashem understood Avimelech's honest mistake. 'And Hashem said to him in a dream: "Also I know that you did this innocently."' Hashem informed the king that because of the mix-up, Avimelech had been prevented from sinning with Sarah. Apparently, heaven had doused the king's lust, afflicting him temporarily with sexual dysfunction. Still, Hashem stopped short of justifying the king's deed due to his forcing Sarah to come to his palace in the first place. The Sages[43] give Avimelech mixed marks saying that he was correct on one count and lied on the other.

'But now return the woman who is married to a prophet. And he will pray on your behalf and you will live.' This naturally calmed the king. He had feared that Avraham would refuse to take Sarah out of concern that her virtue had been breached. No such thing. Privy, Avraham knew the entire truth and of Sarah's innocence. Regarding the king's sin in abducting Sarah, that too, would be forgiven. 'He will pray on your behalf and you will live.' This assured Avimelech that the patriarch's prayer would also heal and restore his manliness that had suffered a setback while Sarah resided in the palace. Hashem continued: If Avimelech turned recalcitrant and did not return Sarah 'know that you and your household will certainly die.'

'And Avimelech woke early in the morning, calling to his servants.' The dream's message and intensity shook the king from his bed. Hastily, he convened his advisors. The king's inner circle feared greatly, shuddered. 'The men were much frightened.' They figured that Sedom's overthrow presaged their own demise. Did the dream foreshadow Azah's downfall? Was Avraham their angel of death?

42. See BT *Sanhedrin* ibid.
43. *Tanchuma Vayera* 25

The king could not nail down whether the dream was authentic and hence summonsed Avraham to clarify its veracity. 'And Avimelech called in Avraham, asking him: "What did you do to us and how did I wrong you that you brought me and my nation to grievous sin? Completely unacceptable." And Avimelech said to Avraham: "What did you see that would make you do this to us?"'

Note these two separate questions' shift in tack and tone. Seemingly, the king took the early offensive and harshly rebuked Avraham. He charged Avraham with malice and entrapment. The consequences of Avraham's trick threatened a king and nation. Avimelech demanded an explanation: What did Azah do that made the forefather bring her to the brink of Sedom's fate? The patriarch, observing the king's furor, sat still and withheld response. Avimelech caught himself and realized that his anger and frayed nerves had gotten out of control. He scaled back, quickly. Calming himself, the king rephrased and relaxed his tone from intense interrogation to meek fact finding. He asked Avraham if he had witnessed his courtiers acting with impropriety. Did the king have a reputation of being a womanizer?

The second question got Avraham to answer. 'And Avraham said, "I thought that this place lacks fear of the Almighty. (Without compunction) they will kill me on account of my wife."' The patriarch explained that he had not used the ploy out of a personal vendetta. Avraham had assumed that Azah shared more than just borders with Sedom. Had they not a common attitude towards deviant values and aberrant sexual mores? Furthermore, Avraham wanted the king to know that in a sense he and Sarah were siblings because she was his father's (but not mother's) daughter (and thus permitted by Noahide laws of incest[44]). He meant that Sarah was his father's brother's daughter because, in the Biblical milieu, nephews and nieces were routinely referred to as siblings. In the same way recall that Avraham referred to his nephew Lot as his brother.[45]

Trying to strike a sympathetic cord with his ruffled royal host, Avraham continued filling in Avimelech on some of his personal background. He told him that when Hashem started him wandering far from home and family, he had made up with Sarah to go along with the sibling contrivance. The king,

44. See BT *Sanhedrin* 58a
45. Chapter three, third *aliyah*

he added, must understand that he did not view Azah as worse than other places where he had sojourned. And certainly the patriarch's words never were intended to divorce his wife. Avraham cleared the record. Avimelech heard that in all of Avraham's Canaan travels, the locals had inquired into the couple's status and clarified that they were married blood relatives. None had been so bold or audacious as to sequester his wife away to the sheiks' palaces or warlords' dens.

Avimelech was won over by the patriarch's sincerity and reason. It verified that he had indeed received a Divine communiqué in his dream. 'And Avimelech took flocks, herds, manservants and maidservants and gave them to Avraham. And he returned his wife Sarah.' Graciously, the king extended his land to the patriarch to dwell in and enjoy.

In Biblical times, a king's exclusive proprietorship and ownership had exceptional reach. In *Parashat Lech Lecha*,[46] the discussion touched on the subject in regard to Avraham and Sarah's sojourn to Egypt. Specifically, royal prerogative precluded another man from cohabiting with any woman with whom a king had sexual relations. As a cross-reference see the story of Adoniyahu and Avishag.[47] Shlomoh considered that proposed union tantamount to high treason.

It was thus beyond comprehension that king Avimelech could have had relations with Sarah and agreed to return her to Avraham. No self-respecting nobleman would tolerate this affront under his nose, in his lifetime and kingdom. Verily, a king would kill the offender – or be killed – for the matter was simply unthinkable. Avimelech went even further to demonstrate the platonic nature of Sarah's palace stay. He lavished gifts upon Avraham. The sequence of events offered the clearest proof and testimony that the king had not touched Sarah.

The Egyptian mishap, though identical regarding Sarah, was handled differently. In that case, rumor had gotten out that the monarch had taken Sarah for himself. Nipping a potential imbroglio and the repercussions thereof in the bud had been one of the main factors in Paroah's decision to run Avraham and Sarah out of town.

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46. See chapter three, second *aliyah*
47. *Melachim* I 2:13–25

'And to Sarah he (Avimelech) said: "Behold I have given your brother one thousand talents of silver. It is a veil for you, for all who are with you. You come clean before all."' Avimelech's gesture and explanation bear one of two interpretations:

- The one thousand talents of silver given to Sarah equaled the gift value of the servants and chattel offered to Avraham. That gift served to make her innocence plain for all to behold. The fact that nothing untoward happened was right in front of their faces, if you will.
- The thousand talents of silver went to Avraham with the express direction to buy veils from those funds for Sarah and all female household help. The king insisted on covering faces in line with appropriate Azah dress codes. In addition, Avimelech advised that henceforth the couple should desist from using the sibling canard. He did not want a harrowing repetition with a less fortuitous outcome.

'And Avraham prayed to the Almighty. Hashem healed Avimelech, his wife and his maidservants. They (subsequently) had children.' From the moment of Sarah's abduction, Heaven had decreed infertility for the king's palace and residents. Perhaps Hashem had already altered their physiologies to that effect. Punishment had been meted out measure for measure. Namely, since the king removed Sarah from her husband, he had effectively prevented the couple from cohabitation and conception. Post patriarchal prayer, the sovereign, spouse and staff were spared the decree, and healed.

§§§

'And the Almighty paid notice to Sarah as promised. And Hashem carried out with respect to her as He said.' Note the contradistinction of this verse to an earlier one. By Divine decree, Avimelech's household had been prevented from conceiving on account of abducting Sarah. This present verse states that Sarah, miraculously, did conceive. The Sages[48] emphasized Avraham's intense prayer on behalf of healing Avimelech as playing a pivotal role in his wife's pregnancy.

'And she conceived. And Sarah gave birth to a son with Avraham in his advanced age precisely as Hashem had spoken it.' It is a moot point to

48. BT *Bava Kamma* 92a

speculate which parent wins some imagined competition of who had received more providence regarding Yitzchak's birth. One verse seems to single out the mother because 'the Almighty remembered Sarah.' However, there is specific paternal reference too since 'Avraham (was) in his advanced age.' Each parent had obstacles that miracles overcame.

Avraham performed two deeds when his son was born. First, 'he named his son born to him – whom Sarah had given birth to – Yitzchak.' The name evinced utter joy and delight in welcoming this wonder child, a baby sensation. He had a companion for his golden years, and Sarah – *nonagenarian Sarah*!!! – had a son. Second, 'Avraham circumcised his son on the eighth day as the Almighty had commanded him.' A reasonable argument can be made that both acts occurred together. That is, Avraham named his son at the circumcision. Importantly, the patriarch's entire attitude and commitment to Hashem's commandments must be acknowledged and fully appreciated. Natural parental and medical concerns let alone protective feelings for the tiny miracle baby's welfare should have given pause and delayed the surgery. It didn't. Not that the patriarch was unfazed or impervious to normal human considerations. Overriding adherence to Hashem's commandments, alone, dictated his behavior. Ultimately, it shaped an acute presence of mind.

Fifth *aliyah*

'And Avraham was one hundred when his son Yitzchak was born to him.'

Avraham's advanced age did not deter the patriarch from circumcising his son. The Torah repeatedly identifies Yitzchak as Avraham's son. This suggests that Avraham related to him as his main offspring, number one son. Yitzchak's arrival certainly had a mirthful aspect to it. The matriarch's comment captured her elation. 'And Sarah said, "Hashem made me a laughing matter. Anyone who hears will ridicule me."' Sarah deflected attention from her one hundred year old husband's renewed virility. She was too overwhelmed by her own hilarious fertility to contemplate Avraham's comical circumstance. The *yoledet* was also concerned that people would poke fun at her for laughing at the *malach*'s tidings.

Further, Sarah expressed delight over successfully breastfeeding her son. She recalled, of course, Avraham's guest's prediction that she would bear a child. Nonetheless, the matriarch never expected nor was told she could lactate and nurse. Hashem undoubtedly performed this miracle so that the baby patriarch would not have to suckle from strange Canaanite breasts.

'And the boy grew. And Avraham threw a big celebration on the day that Yitzchak was weaned.' Despite the fact that the composition of Sarah's milk lacked the full nutrients of younger mothers, her son developed normally. Avraham marked the occasion of Sarah's successful full term of nursing with an expression of gratitude to Hashem. As tremendous a miracle of Yitzchak's birth or *brit milah* had been, it did not carry the same weight. It had been foretold. Hence there were weaning festivities but no birthday bash.

'And Sarah saw Egyptian Hagar's son born to Avraham carousing. And she told Avraham to expel the handmaid with her son.' The demand, on the surface, could not seem more unreasonable, vindictive, and excessive. What prompted Sarah to present Avraham with one of his life's greatest predicaments?

Fairly assuming that Sarah nursed Yitzchak for two or three years, the crisis flared at the weaning. Or perhaps better, the situation came to a head at that juncture. What significance did Sarah give to the weaning? Intuitively she had grasped that two crown princes could not inherit a king's single diadem. Caution dictated that Sarah delay raising the issue until her child passed the median infant mortality age. Demanding Yishmael's expulsion would be hard enough on his father. But slapping an ultimatum on Avraham when Yitzchak had not reached three years of age and developmental viability would have really been stretching things.

Consider the patriarch's family home life dynamics up to the point of Yitzchak's birth. The Torah's reference to Yishmael as 'Egyptian Hagar's son' carries derogatory undertones. The teenager behaved as if Yitzchak was some insignificant intrusion. As far as Yishmael was concerned, he alone was Hagar's son and Avraham's heir apparent. Period. Raised in the patriarch's house, the child naturally had been doted on because he had been considered the exclusive successor. Avraham had certainly showered him with paternal love. Following the father's example, everyone under the patriarch's tutelage doused the lad with affection, treating him as crown prince. Yishmael, for his part,

assumed a royal pose. Confident to the point of cockiness, young Yishmael positively strutted. Sarah observed the teenager's gait, attitude. Something, she calculated, was terribly amiss. It was the patriarch and matriarch's son Yitzchak who properly deserved progenitureship. Viewing religious evolution as a process that separated the chaff from the wheat and the peel from fruit, Sarah's mind's eye observed the pattern clearly. Hashem's design came into focus. Borrowing an evolutionary theme Yitzchak should be served by Yishmael since he represented the more essential, authentic article. Further, she reasoned, the longer Yishmael remained the harder it would be to dislodge him. Family patterns, after all, tend towards homeostasis.

Sarah looked to set the order straight. Yishmael had to go. As Avraham's son, he was too firmly entrenched to dethrone. The matriarch understood that without the slightest doubt, in good time Yishmael would assert primogeniture and claim half of his father's mantle. The auspicious opportunity arrived with Yitzchak's weaning. Sarah included Hagar in the banishment because, as Yishmael's mother, the handmaid was a threat. Hagar at home with Avraham meant she had full wife status, which translated into Yishmael later nabbing part of Avraham's estate as rightful joint heir, even if the kid had moved out. Sarah determined that the proper residence for concubine Hagar was now outside the patriarchal home.

Recall that Sarah's infertility prompted and initiated her husband to take Hagar. Until the miracle birth of Yitzchak, Sarah was content, even desirous of Yishmael taking full control after the patriarch's passing. She therefore had no issue with Hagar hanging around her living room. Yitzchak reaching childhood changed the entire matrix. High time had come to realign matters and return to natural priorities. The matriarch calculated that the two poachers, Hagar and Yishmael, needed to pack up. Why? Sarah explained to Avraham that 'that handmaiden's – *inferior* – son will not inherit with m*y* – *matriarchal* – son, with – *righteous, handsome, perfect* – Yitzchak.' Sarah asserted her and her son's rightful place in the Divine scheme. At the end of *Parashat Chayei Sarah*, Avraham remarried after Sarah's death and fathered many children. The Torah writes explicitly that the patriarch sent them all away with generous gifts. Undoubtedly, Yishmael was included in that category as will be explained there.[49]

49. See chapter five, sixth *aliyah*

Where did the patriarch stand? To his thinking, this thing was terribly off. 'And the matter was very bad in Avraham's eyes on account of his son.' Likely the verse's inductive logic teaches that while Avraham was upset at contemplating driving Hagar away, he was very distraught on account of Yishmael. A father's compassion for his son is, naturally, boundless. Hashem, Knower of human thought and design, looked into Sarah's initiative. The Almighty found it proper and right. Hashem instructed and assured Avraham. 'And the Almighty said to Avraham: "Don't view the matter concerning the lad and your handmaid badly."' Note the priority. Since Avraham was disturbed more about his son, he is mentioned first. Yet Avraham also felt amiss regarding Hagar. Addressing the bigger picture Hashem gave Sarah's directive Divine blessing. 'Listen to what Sarah tells you. The fact is that your seed goes through Yitzchak.'

Hashem explained that Hagar was Sarah's handmaid. By right, matrons dictate matters concerning handmaidens. Avraham understood that it was within Sarah's purview to dismiss Hagar. And regarding chucking the child? Heaven spelled it out. Yitzchak had been chosen – the true heir. Some commentators[50] suggested that the separation was to sever Yitzchak's association with Yishmael and his undesirable ways. Hashem softened the blow when He foretold Yishmael's future. Handmaid Hagar's son would grow into a populous nation as Heaven would guide him. Yishmael's leaving his father's household, Avraham learned, would not have a negative impact. Hashem would see to that. It was meant to signal to the patriarch that he should not take it too hard.

Attesting to Avraham's piety, the Torah relates that the matter was closed without appeal. Moreover the patriarch approached this affair with his characteristic zeal, immediately attending to Yishmael and Hagar's marching orders. 'Avraham woke early in the morning.' He packed sufficient road supplies including food and water. Likely they were not given gold or silver as Avraham did not want that to be misconstrued as an inheritance.

'And he took for them bread and water giving it to Hagar. He placed it on her shoulder and the boy.' It should be abundantly clear that the pithy verse is not saying that Avraham placed sixteen- or seventeen-year-old Yishmael on Hagar's shoulder. How ludicrous. The intent is that the young man carried his own supplies, placing them on his shoulders as did his mother. Alternatively

50. *Ralbag*

other commentators[51] attempt to read the verse literally. Due to Yishmael's unruliness, Avraham devised a way of strapping the recalcitrant to Hagar so that he would not return home.

What should have been ample water turned out to be too little. Hagar wandered and got lost before finding established desert caravan roads and inns. 'And the water ran out. She placed the lad under one of the shrubs.' Yishmael languished after he finished the water. Few situations cause acute desperation like thirst. Hagar, seeing her son's plight, gave him up for dead. She led him to a shady bush. Not bearing to see her son's death, she distanced herself. 'She said: "I will not watch the child die."'

Although Hagar wept, the Torah records how Hashem heeded the boy's straits specifically. 'And the Almighty heard the boy's sound and a *malach* called to Hagar from heaven.' This does not refer to actual prayers uttered by Yishmael, who offered none. Heaven simply pitied the boy in his hopeless predicament. 'The *malach* called out to Hagar from heaven and he said to her: "Hagar, listen! Don't fear, for Hashem has heard the boy's sound from where he rests."' Clearly, Hashem demanded of Hagar to show resilience, informing her that the situation was not bleak. Divine relief had been secured for the lad. Dehydrated, Yishmael's lifelessness stirred Divine compassion. Hagar was directed to a nearby fresh water source that resuscitated the boy.

How was Hagar catapulted to receive prophecy, a state of higher consciousness generally reserved for the pious select few? This communiqué was delivered to Hagar on Avraham's merit. The well's revelation was designed to restore Hagar's hope in her son's life and future. Her banishment from Avraham's household devastated the Egyptian maidservant. Her son's shame and humiliation dashed all her aspirations. Ditching the boy under a bush had been an act of bitter frustration and anger rather than pity. Tears of abandonment consumed her. Venting at Yishmael's turn of fate, Hagar was on the verge of bolting. If the father could dump his child, she fumed, then why couldn't she?

51. *Ran*

Hashem's words took specific aim. An undesirable scenario included Hagar fleeing, running off with another man, bearing him children. Double parental abandonment, assuming Yishmael's survival, could have paved the way for the lad's return home. Under no circumstances would Avraham have been able to stand idly by and allow his son to perish. The *malach*'s mission essentially came down to endearing disgraced Yishmael to his mother. 'Get up and support the child. Put your arm around him.' His mother's renewed attachment would enable the fulfillment of the Divine promise to Avraham.

Recapping the three prophecies (two to Hagar – here and in *Parashat Lech Lecha*,[52] and one to King Avimelech) a pattern is revealed. Each Divine communication specifically came about for the sake of the forefather's well-being. The first one goaded Hagar to return to the patriarch's house.[53] The second one came to protect and enrich Avraham. Finally this third one saved Yishmael, freeing Avraham to devote himself exclusively to Yitzchak. Thus, while prophecy generally flows to deserving recipients, there are exceptions.

'And Hashem opened her (Hagar's) eyes and she spotted the well.' It would be inaccurate to presume that a miracle zapped a well into place. Hagar and Yishmael's merits did not warrant it. By contrast, when the Jews wandered for forty years in the desert, Hashem did perform fresh water miracles that supplied the nation with the precious, life-giving necessity.[54] In Hagar's case, the well had been present but she did not see it. Hashem inspired her to carefully inspect the area in search of a water source.

The passage concludes with Yishmael's rescue. In fulfillment of Hashem's promise to Avraham, Yishmael grew up under the Almighty's Providence. Divine guidance manifested itself in Yishmael's archery and hunting skill. He dwelled in deserts, adapting to their hardships. With time Yishmael had populous descendants that followed suit. He passed down to his children the craft of desert survival. Hagar found him a suitable *shidduch* from her native Egypt. That milieu most suited his inner being.

52. Chapter three, sixth *aliyah*
53. Ibid.
54. *Shmot* 17:6; *Bamidbar* 20:11; 21:16–18

Sixth *aliyah*

'And it was at that time that Avimelech and his top army brass said to Avraham: "Hashem is with you in all that you do."'

This section that begins with powerful King Avimelech suing for peace with Avraham underscores a fundamental point. Avraham had become formidable, a force in his own right. The king, joined by a delegation of other military leaders, approached the patriarch. He had moved outside the city, encamped with his family and flocks. These leaders had heard of or witnessed three of Avraham's colossal achievements. The first was his fabled military victory over the vastly superior armies commanded by the four kings.[55] The second concerned the Divine saving of Sarah from the clutches of foreign kings (Egypt and Azah). Despite openly hostile populations and venues, he managed to keep danger at bay and accumulate fabulous wealth. Lastly, Avraham fathered a son in his advanced years. These phenomenal achievements all contributed to his aura, dynamo, and mystique. What could be a greater tribute to Avraham's character and reputation than regional leaders seeking out this lone man? After all, he did not command a standing army or live behind a moated, stone castle. The aged patriarch who toiled as a shepherd and lived in a tent had been sought out by mighty kings and warriors. They feared him.

King Avimelech and his contingent shuddered over Avraham setting his sights on taking over their land. They petitioned Avraham to sign peace treaties and allow them autonomy in their respective regional spheres. 'And now give me your solemn oath by Hashem's Name right here.' The king wanted to consummate a multi-generational border arrangement and appealed to the patriarch's sense of compassion and appreciation for Avimelech's hospitality and generosity. In a gesture of incredible esteem, Avimelech offered to break from protocol and sign the treaty at Avraham's home rather than in the royal palace. 'And Avraham said: "I do solemnly swear."' Note the forefather's words. They imply that whereas King Avimelech sued for a three generational accord to include his children and grandchildren, Avraham capped it. The patriarch would not extend it for that long. He bound only himself to maintain a treaty, but not successive generations. The Almighty had promised all of the land to his descendants. By what right, then, could Avraham carve up his children and grandchildren's inheritance, national treasure?

55. See chapter three, fourth *aliyah*.

One issue hindered the comprehensive peace accords. Avraham rebuked his partner and royal friend on account of a riparian rights dispute. 'And Avraham chastised Avimelech about the water well that Avimelech's servants had stolen.' The king explained that he had not been aware of a problem and certainly never authorized anyone to harm Avraham's water rights. The patriarch saw a way out of the impasse. 'And Avraham took flock and herd and gave it to Avimelech. They entered into a covenant.' This gift served to effectively transfer exclusive water ownership to the patriarch. Although, for reasons explained shortly, Avraham intended to affect the covenant with a nominal seven ewe deposit, he presented a sizeable quantity of livestock to the king. A seven sheep sum total would have insulted Avimelech.

After solving the water dispute, 'Avraham placed the seven sheep aside.' The king did not understand the meaning of this segregation and asked its import. Avraham explained that the first transfer of flocks and herds had been an outright gift. The exchange of water ownership, the patriarch determined, occurred with the payment of the seven sheep. The ancient peoples of that era often used the number seven in the context of an oath, in acknowledgement of the belief in the seven planets' astrological providence. (Note the connection between the Hebrew *sheva* (seven) and *shevuah* (oath).) Although Avraham was far from subscribing to such a credo, he wanted to strike a chord of commitment in Avimelech's heart. Breaking the oath was risking very unlucky stars. To commemorate the exoneration and full settlement 'they therefore called the place Beer Sheva because there the two had taken oaths.'

The king and his delegation returned to Philistine. Avraham settled in Beer Sheva for many years. The two men, though bonded by friendship, lived different lifestyles and professed different beliefs. Another clue to that position can be found in the verse. 'And he (Avraham) planted an *eshel* in Beer Sheva, calling there in the Name of Hashem – Lord of the world.' The Almighty would always serve as the patriarch's anchor. Neither his proximity to Azah nor the foreign moral values that resulted from the charting of the constellations budged Avraham's deep, unshakeable faith.

Avraham planted an *eshel* – a huge shady tree – next to a well he purchased from Avimelech. Recall that the present *parashah* opened with the patriarch attending to his guests under a shade tree in Elonei Mamre. Sages[56]

56. BT *Sotah* 10a; *Bereshit Rabbah* 54:6

have given beautiful interpretations to Avraham's *eshel*, all consistent with the patriarch's generosity and dedication to learning Hashem's ways.

Seventh *aliyah*

'After these events the Almighty made Avraham a standard bearer. He said to him: "Avraham." And he answered saying: "I am here, ready."'

Akedat Yitzchak has no parallel.[57] It was the apogee and quintessential act that forever knotted the Jewish People to their Heavenly Father. The capstone of faith, the *akedah* has been a focal point of prayer and aspiration from time immemorial. Jews, therefore, are well-versed in the story line because its litany weaves the very fabric of Jewish education. Commentators have justifiably written extensively about the *akedah*. The subject that commands such awe will be treated here at length.

Our discussion begins with the *akedah*'s primary point. What was it meant to accomplish? The answer is an intricate one that requires a broad look into an existential question: Why did the Maker create man? As a corollary, what did man's report card look like until this point in history?

The second question is addressed first. Recall that Adam and Chavah were placed in Eden's sheltered and self-sufficient garden. The first couple inclined to material excess.[58] Tragically, they gravitated to the Knowledge Tree's fruit and ate from it. Its intoxicating allure consumed them. The seductive tree did more than that. Since the garden's two main trees were wholly incompatible, their reckless pursuit of the Knowledge Tree drove them away from Eden's Life Tree. Their disdain for Life's fruit resulted in barriers that blocked the pursuit of a meaningful and intimate relationship with the Almighty.

Unquestionably, Adam's turning his back on the Life Tree created a paradigm for his descendants to this very day. By and large, human history documents man's headlong preoccupation with conventional and banal

57. Deeper into the *akedah* narrative, Abravanel takes to task some commentators who misinterpret *Rambam* (*Moreh Nevuchim* II:42) as asserting that the entire episode was merely a prophetic vision. Their reading stems from misconstruing *Rambam's* statement that *malachim* are always experienced via prophecy alone, as meaning that *all* the surrounding events fall under a similar heading. Abravanel proves the error of this assertion, labels the position heretical, and calls those who espouse it wicked and incompetent.

58. See chapter one, third *aliyah*

ethics, commercial values. Ten successive generations following Adam were no different. Societal norms shackled and snuffed out soul work altogether. Heartfelt religious acts and contemplative individualism had been edited out of the script. The eternal part of man yearned for detachment, spirituality, and otherworldliness. But civilization would not abide it. Society came to a dead end. The Great Flood eradicated it together with the brutish men it was composed of.

Noach remained. His personal piety preserved his three sons. It did not take long for post-flood folly to resemble antediluvian levels. Familiar patterns again took the shape. The search for the Almighty ceased. Hashem desired to keep the world afloat and thus intervened when opportunity presented itself. It arrived in the person of a young, restless thinker. One iconoclastic man grabbed a torch, and lit the darkened dingy alleys where empty men stumbled. Toiling, Avraham discovered his Maker. Painstaking reason, independent analysis, relentless investigation brought the budding patriarch to his find, to Hashem. Training his light outward, Avraham taught others how Hashem operates in man's arena and world. The more the patriarch explored, the more Divine radiance emerged. When the Torah stated that Avraham called Hashem the Almighty,[59] it really meant that for the first time, someone bothered to get it right. He got the whole big picture about how Hashem is the Master of the Universe; he understood how Hashem created, moves, watches over and directs it. Precisely because of Avraham's revelations, the Almighty picked his descendants over all the world's nations for Divine partnership.

Hashem found fit to initiate a chosen lineage with Avraham because he could be relied upon to educate his children properly. They would inherit their noble father's fiery passions. Hashem then further narrowed the choice. Specifically, it took on an additional mystique with Yitzchak's sensational conception and birth to righteous, aged parents. In this context, Avraham's circumcision prior to Yitzchak's birth completed the preparation for the emergence of a people whose very birthmark signaled moderation in all things temporal. Temperance in sexual intimacy, eating and drinking distinguishes a Hashem-fearing nation. Petty bickering and senseless arguing result when the feckless pursuit of excess destabilizes man's harmony. Derailed, he goes haywire. Avraham's circumcision, in a real sense, set the stage for safeguarding

59. Chapter three, fifth *aliyah*

Yitzchak's descendants from abusing worldly pleasures. This covenant ruptured civilization's rut. Yitzchak's conception heralded human capacity and opportunity for spiritual growth. Man sipped freedom.

Significantly, Yitzchak was the first person to be born of a circumcised father. That holy distinction placed him on an even higher moral plane than Avraham since Terach lacked the covenantal mark. Avraham was chosen to father the Jewish Nation, and Yitzchak was its first member. Avraham's son was miraculously placed on earth to be tapped as the fresh fountainhead of the Jewish People.

Avraham was chosen for the *akedah's* mission. He had been selected to serve as Hashem's agent to redeem Yitzchak, and his seedling nation. Sacrificing Yitzchak as a burnt offering metaphorically incinerated Yitzchak's temporal, physical part and released his eternal soul. His exalted charge required dedication to pure reason, presence of mind. The Jews embodied by Yitzchak rose, touched eternity. The nation from now on would have to answer to the One Above and would bond with Him forever by virtue of their mind over matter mission.

Heaven promised guidance, protection and eternity for a nation that would internalize sublime awareness leading to a strict adherence to Hashem's commandments. Intimacy with Hashem liberated the Chosen People from nature's vagaries. Celestial supervision was for peoples stuck in sensual muck. The *akedah* came to represent this for Yitzchak and all successive generations. The *akedah's* centrality in Jewish liturgy is well-deserved. Through trouble and travail, every Jew flashes his or her status as a card-carrying member of a nation dedicated to Hashem's service.

The grand message was the main thing and no scintilla was detracted by Avraham's stopped knife at the last moment. From the outset, the Almighty never intended anything else. All benefits of the *akedah* were accrued at the moment Yitzchak breathed what he believed was his final breath. Any connection he had with his physical side was undone, cast off. Cognizance of what really mattered was etched indelibly into every layer and fiber of his existence. Only alive could Yitzchak continue Avraham's work. Death would have only squandered invaluable human resources.

In sum, this is the *akedah's* essence. Hashem entrusted the first noble patriarch with a mission. Serious progress could not be undertaken as long as Adam's sin's stigma remained. Yitzchak's conception scrubbed a stubborn

stain. Palpably, the *akedah* cleansed the newborn nation. The act did nothing, per se, for Hashem. Nor did it impact Avraham. The *akedah* stood on its own merit because it offered man a way back to Eden's ideal. A path to intimacy with Hashem was repaved. Those trekking it would have to live in a different sphere, dimension. In return, existence would break out of its natural boundaries, guided by Divine Providence. 'I [Hashem] will be for them the Almighty and they [Jewish Nation] will be for Me a People.' Tying Yitzchak linked a people with their Maker and cinched the Divine promises made to Avraham. Getting Yitzchak to the craggy mountain altar took all of Avraham's inner resolve, commitment to Hashem.

The Sages[60] aptly described it in terms of *the* epic struggle for man's soul, essence. Satan – the force pushing man to lose himself in lust – charged that the patriarch partied when Yitzchak was weaned, and forgot to offer any sacrifice to Hashem. For a second's flash that sumptuous smorgasbord apparently smothered Avraham's connection to Hashem. The Almighty countered with the *akedah* which would proclaim to the world that Avraham was capable of slaughtering dissolute society's most sacred cows. In his mind, spirituality reigned supreme.

The discussion of the *akedah* has thus far been introductory. The Torah prefaces 'After these events Hashem made Avraham a standard bearer.' The *akedah* is linked to the preceding events because they provide the appropriate background. Indicators for Yitzchak's destiny thus far included:

- Avraham's circumcision
- Avraham and Sarah's name change
- Birth to hundred year old Avraham from ninety year old Sarah
- Yishmael's forced abdication from the patriarch's throne and household because 'your seed goes through Yitzchak'
- Avimelech suing for a treaty due to fear that the forefather or his son would occupy his land

The *akedah* should be seen in that sequential sketch. Every neuron in the patriarch's brain screamed – *it can't be*! The commandment to sacrifice his son came out the great clear blue.

60. BT *Sanhedrin* 89b

Was the *akedah* really a test – as the term '*nissah*' used here might imply? If so, who was the tester? To say that the Almighty needed to probe man's mind in order to determine information is, of course, absurd. The Creator knows human minds and souls. The word in this context means 'made (him) a standard bearer.' Hashem issued the *akedah* command for the purpose of raising the patriarch's banner, hoisting his monumental sacrifice as if on a tall pole. Word of Avraham's immortal act of faith spread throughout the world. The *akedah*'s dissemination reverberated, turning the patriarch into a living legend. It created the standard for successive religious seekers to emulate.

The Rambam[61] lists two main lessons derived from the *akedah*. Firstly, the *akedah* demonstrated Avraham's love and reverence for Hashem. It capped a lifetime of selfless submission and obedience. Recall how Avraham unflinchingly left his father, family and homeland. Later, at the age when men are old and fragile, he resolved to fulfill the circumcision commandment. Trusting prophecy, he turned his beloved Yishmael out. Uncompromising faith had steadied his hand to slay Yitzchak. Nothing in this world could have convinced Avraham to do all that, save undying devotion.

Second, the *akedah* served to assuage the doubts anyone might have about the veracity of the prophetic experience. Prophetic vision was crystal clear. Though Divine communiqués appeared in visions, dreams or riddles, they were not empty chimeras. Had Avraham harbored a slightest doubt as to whether Hashem had indeed told him to slit his son's throat – hell or high water could not have made him do it.

A third benefit should be added. The *akedah* alluded to an eternal truth regarding man's boundless soul and next-world reward for obeying Hashem's commandments. Had Avraham not believed in Divine reward, he would not have sacrificed Yitzchak on an altar. The threat of death or poverty would certainly not have motivated Avraham since such specters do not register on a dire consequence scale relative to murdering one's son. What good would accrue to Avraham with longevity or wealth seeing that his most beloved son was dead? Rather, Avraham's willingness to sacrifice Yitzchak acceded to the fundamental belief in eternal, spiritual reward. His tenacious trust in a future eternal reward alone could make Yitzchak's death sensible and meaningful.

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61. *Moreh Nevuchim* III:24

In sum, the *akedah* was not a test. It was a testimony. Hashem marked Avraham as the pious example for truth seekers to follow. The *akedah* was nothing less than a loving testimony to the patriarch's greatness. It decorated the ancient patriarch who answered a call and unswervingly professed Hashem's Name, come what may.

Another possible rendition of the verse does translate '*nissah*' as "tested," but it does not refer to the *akedah*, despite the commandment having all of a test's trappings. The Torah tells us that 'After the preceding events wherein Hashem had *already* tested Avraham,' He told him to take Yitzchak for a far more colossal cause.

The Sages[62] write that Avraham endured tests on ten separate occasions. A situation can arise whereby an initiator of a challenge is not a tester but the one asked is being tested. Take for example a case where a man in dire financial straits approaches his friend for a loan. The borrower's desire is for money. It is the lender who either passes or fails what he perceives as a test depending on his generosity. Thus, for instance, when Hashem issued the first commandment to leave Charan and go to Israel the matter was not a test but a desire to connect the young patriarch with the Holy Land. The Torah therefore does not preface any of those events by stating that "Hashem tested Avraham." Note the very deliberate phrasing by the Sages – "Avraham endured ten tests."[63] They do not say that Hashem tested the patriarch.

By contrast, the *akedah's* main purpose was to salute Avraham and grant him due recognition. Hashem considered all of the patriarch's innumerable personal triumphs and singled out the *akedah* to publicize his greatness specifically because of the dreadful prospect of filicide and human sacrifice.

Skeletal dialogue, ambiguous word choice and simplistic language weave the entire *akedah* story. Hashem calmly called Avraham's name once, to obviate any claim that the *akedah* was a product of panic. Calling twice connotes insistent prodding, and Hashem did not want to unnerve the patriarch. He tersely replied: 'I am here. Ready.' Avraham, of course, did not know what Hashem was about to ask of him. Nonetheless, that did not deter his willingness to comply regardless of the challenge or difficulty.

62. *Mishnah Avot* 5:3

63. עשרה נסיונות נתנסה אברהם

A request followed. 'And He [Hashem] said: "Take (now, please) your son, your only [one], the one you love, Yitzchak. Go to the land of Moriah and set him up as a burnt offering atop one of the mountains that I [Hashem] will reveal to you."' Note that in our translation, after the verb "take," the two words "now" and "please" are placed in parentheses. The Hebrew word allows for two possible distinct readings. If "now" is inserted to follow "take" then 'take now' emphasizes appropriate timing. Hashem informed Avraham that the hour of inducting Yitzchak into a new enhanced reality of Divine Providence had arrived. A spiritual promotion awaited, so to speak, an altar event on Mt. Moriah. However if 'take please' is intended then Hashem utilized supplicatory language. His softened tones implied that the ensuing commandment came with an exit clause. Fairness dictated that Hashem stick with His promise that Yitzchak would be Avraham's future, and He could only ask Avraham to voluntarily forego that guarantee.

Several terms of endearment preceded Yitzchak's name such as 'your beloved, only son.' Did each adoring expression thrust deeper into the patriarch's psyche, rendering the act progressively more devastating if not humanly impossible? Hashem was loading the dice, granting Avraham one reason after another to object, inveigle, plead, refuse.

- Surely Avraham felt infinitely more attached to *his son* than to Sedom's strangers whose lost cause elicited protracted and passionate bargaining.
- While in a technical and biological sense Yitzchak was not the only son, still Yishmael had been permanently sent out. It was as if the forefather had one son.
- The father-son relationship had been close-knit. Love focused on a single individual is most intense.
- Mention alone of Yitzchak's name had to carry unbounded affection in Avraham's heart. Yitzchak had been the miracle child who grew into handsome manhood, a regal patriarch who would carry on Avraham and Sarah's legacy.

In sum, each of these four endearment words had the potential to derail if not delay Yitzchak's fate. Added to this turbulent emotional crisis of the moment is dialogue couched in calculated ambiguity. Hashem provided ample maneuverability to turn down His suggestion. Yet, submissive Avraham did

not contemplate questioning his Maker's will. Rationalization, it appears, never entered the patriarch's vocabulary.

Hashem continued 'Go to the land of Moriah and place him for a burnt offering atop one of the mountains that I [Hashem] will reveal to you.' Three approaches answer the question: Why Moriah?

- The Almighty desired Moriah out of future *mikdash* considerations. The mountain marks the spot of Yerushalayim's Temple.
- Adam had been created on that mountainous terrain. Hashem returned him there upon his expulsion from Eden. There could be no better place for his sin's antithesis.
- Noach had built the first post-flood altar on Mt. Moriah.

Additionally, since Hashem never contemplated actual manslaughter but wished to bring Yitzchak to the brink, privacy and isolation figured significantly. A desolate mountain peak provided the perfect concealment from peeking passersby. Why? Had strangers happened upon Avraham as he let down his knife, they would have believed Avraham failed in his quest. Recall that *malachim* appeared to Avraham by Hashem beaming their virtual appearance to the patriarch.[64] Since the *malach* who stayed Avraham's hand did not appear to *them*, they would not have been privy to the command that rescinded Yitzchak's execution decree.

The Land of Moriah boasted many mountains. Why did Hashem not specify which one was slated to host Yitzchak's altar? The lack of direction guaranteed that Avraham would be alone and necessitated a second prophecy informing Avraham of a precise location. Avraham had yet more opportunity to rethink, regret, and return home.

'And Avraham woke early, saddled his donkey. He brought his two youths along and Yitzchak his son.' Apparently the *akedah* prophecy had been transmitted in a night dream. At daybreak he immediately prepared for his journey. The verses detail Avraham's morning in order to emphasize his religious presence of mind; nothing was helter-skelter. Steady methodology guided each act, each step. Three straight days of calm marching, perfect cadence. Paternal compassion never interrupted his pace. There was no regret, compulsion, or second-guessing. Since the patriarch viewed his journey readiness in terms

64. See first *aliyah* above.

of the fulfillment of Divine will, Avraham would not delegate any detail to others. He saddled his own donkey with alacrity.

In a sense, Avraham's ability to keep a parent's empathy subdued for so long was a display well beyond superhuman resolve. When Hashem threatened to wipe out the Jewish Nation,[65] He said that he would do it "in an instant" since waiting longer would give sufficient time for His mercy to overwhelm Him. Inconceivably, Avraham held on for three days.

Why were there two accompanying youths? One reason they were allowed to tag along was to deflect Yitzchak's suspicions. Another reason was for the kids to assist with the loaded donkey. The heavy weight would have proved too burdensome for Yitzchak's shoulders.

Another technical reason probably dictated Avraham's morning activities – reducing exposure. A pre-dawn exit enabled the revered folk hero to leave without having nosey townspeople ask questions. For that same reason Avraham wanted to attend to saddling the donkey himself. Unlike his servant Eliezer's travelling mode[66] and despite wide customary camel usage, Avraham chose a donkey. A camel certainly would have clued others to the trip's duration. Donkey travel, on the other hand, conveyed local errand-running. Bringing along two regular attendants reinforced this early morning jaunt's casualness. He barely gave them sufficient notice to inquire about the journey let alone properly pack belongings. Avraham simply grabbed their hands, hurrying them along. Uncharacteristically, he also chopped his own wood for a burnt-offering to avoid bringing anyone unnecessary into the loop.

Avraham had a stable full of donkeys to choose from. He brought the beast set aside for his personal use so its absence would not be noticed. Other household members likely had particular donkeys they liked to use. This way nobody would begin interrogation into "his" missing pack animal. The Sages[67] found moral instruction in the verse, explaining that the picayune detail of saddling *his own* donkey echoed the patriarch's personal demeanor. He effectively stifled and saddled his natural paternal love in order to keep Hashem's command. Furthermore, the Sages[68] put Avraham and the *akedah* into sweeping grand historical perspective. Avraham's mode of transport

65. *Shmot* 33:5; *Bamidbar* 16:21
66. See chapter five, third *aliyah*
67. Source not located
68. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 31

preceded the donkey rides of Moshe[69] and *Melech HaMashiach*.[70] These three individuals would conquer man's lower aspirations respectively via the *akedah*, receiving the Torah, and Redemption. Taken as a sum total of human experience, Avraham represented its beginning, Moshe its middle, and *mashiach* the concluding chapters of the ultimate national, self-realized pious harmony.

Avraham taking along his attendants antecedes cutting the sacrificial wood. Sometime after his departure, Avraham stopped somewhere out of town, chopping down wood. Plausibly, he did not bring wood from home to avoid the arousal of Sarah's curiosity. Later, Yitzchak himself figured out what the wood was for and wondered aloud about the sacrificial lamb's location.

'And he got up and went to the place that Hashem had told him. On the third day Avraham lifted his eyes. He saw the place in the distance.' The patriarch likely trekked for three days up and down Moriah's mountain range in search of the spot. Prophetically, he honed in on a place laden with historical and religious significance. The Sages[71] assert that a cloud hovered over the designated mount.

'And Avraham said to his attendants: "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the young man will go until where we will prostrate and return to you."' He obviously wanted space from the assistants and they were told to stay back. The attendants thinking they were to miss some grand spectacle might lead them to superfluous questioning or following their master. He told them to sit with the donkey, instructing them that they should not wander or pasture it because Avraham might need their services quickly. A quick bow and they would be right back.

Alternatively, Avraham may have excused himself explaining why the attendants could not join them. Seeing that the slope was too steep and the donkey could not walk it, Avraham insisted that the two remain and care for the animal. Ditching the donkey provided a plausible rationale when Avraham transferred the wood from its back to Yitzchak's shoulders.

At this juncture, the father walked and his son carried the sacrificial accessories. Together they climbed. Some commentators read the next few verses as Avraham trying to have his son realize where all this was heading. The deliberate placement of wood on Yitzchak would set off alarm bells.

69. *Shmot* 4:20
70. *Zecharyah* 9:9
71. *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:1

Wow! This wood is heavy! What's it doing on my delicate back? Why did father bring it at all... 'And he (Avraham) took in his hand the fire and knife as they walked on together.'

Anomalies abounded. Fire needs to be properly handled and not carried close to the chest or in garments. Knives generally are not carried in the hand but rather hung around waists. Yitzchak was clued in that his father completely expected a sacrificial kill to take place forthwith.

Naturally this piqued Yitzchak's curiosity. The thin initial dialogue highlights the son's filial respect. Yitzchak requested his father's permission to speak. Affectionately, Avraham accepted his most beloved son's request. 'And Yitzchak said to Avraham his father. And he said: "Father." And he (Avraham) said: "I am here. Ready, my son." And he said: "Here is the fire and wood. But where is the lamb for burnt-offering?"' Yitzchak knew that a burnt-offering would transpire since he had seen his father in the past painstakingly choose altar wood. Yitzchak's back now bore the brunt of the familiar quality logs.

Pay attention to Yitzchak's astute thinking process. Yitzchak had reasoned that something was amiss. Had his father desired to offer a burnt-offering, as the wood and fire suggested, then from where was the animal to come? Clearly, Avraham should have already prepared one. That is unless, of course, it was supposed to be procured from locals. But if in fact Avraham had intended to buy a sacrificial sheep, why schlep wood and fire for three days? Surely they were more readily available than animals. Yitzchak asked: 'Here is the fire and wood. But where is the lamb burnt-offering?' Did his father carelessly forget the essentials and bring along accessories? He did not ask about his father's knife for travelers regularly bring knives for self-defense.

Avraham responded. 'And Avraham said: "Hashem chose for Himself the burnt offering sheep, my son."' Avraham shocked his son with the truth. He cautioned the lamb child not to think him deranged or bloodthirsty. The act would be in solemn fulfillment of Hashem's will. Yitzchak accepted his fate with equanimity. He did not bolt, stall, or cower in terror. 'They both walked together.'

Assuming – as the aforementioned commentaries do – that Yitzchak knew he was going to die, we must address why the *akedah* is viewed as solely Avraham's triumph over his natural instincts. Apparently, while the torment of knowing one is about to be slaughtered is serious, perhaps even more than an act of filicide, it is

over fairly quickly. After death, one feels nothing. Avraham would suffer endless agony – before, during, and after the *akedah* – until his dying day.

A parallel is found in the story of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah.[72] The Sages[73] assess that while they were able to withstand prostrating to Nevuchadnetzar's idol on the pain of death, they would have succumbed to persistent torture. An additional point accruing merit to Avraham over Yitzchak is the fact that he was commanded, and the Sages[74] teach that one who performs a *mitzvah* given no option of refusal receives greater reward than one who volunteers to carry out Hashem's will.

However, these explanations fall short in accounting for the complete lack of a Biblical *yishar koach* for the human sacrificial lamb. Giving up one's life is a qualitative quantum leap of agony relative to the father told to do it. At the very least, kudos to both should have been recorded for posterity.

The truth is therefore that Yitzchak was completely in the dark regarding his role – until the last second. Avraham wanted it that way out of fear that the nimble youngster would make a dash for it as soon as he figured it out. Who knows if Avraham had not purposefully strapped down the youth with wood as a ruse to prevent his escape? When Yitzchak asked about the sacrifice, he may have been leery not of death, but of schlepping the sheep from some mystery vendor. Avraham calmly replied that Hashem would supply a sacrificial offering. Father remained steely and composed despite Yitzchak's words chosen to elicit fatherly love and affection. They walked together – Yitzchak oblivious, Avraham opaque. Hashem noted the patriarch's words. Soon they all came true.

Having arrived on the top of Mt. Moriah, work began on the altar and it was quickly completed. The Sages[75] describe the altar as the one Noach used after the flood. It had curried much favor with Heaven but centuries of disuse and inclement weather caused it unrecognizable disrepair. Hashem yearned for its renewal. The Torah teaches how conscientiously Avraham had refurbished the altar, arranged the wood, and tied his son. Incredibly, he executed everything without the slightest distraction or compunction. Superhuman serenity served to further dupe and stall Yitzchak from catching wind of what

72. See *Daniyel* 3
73. BT *Ketubot* 33b
74. BT *Kiddushin* 31a
75. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 31

was afoot. The possibility of Hashem commanding his father to perform such a horrific act never crossed his mind. Yet.

Scarcely had Yitzchak ridded himself of pyre wood, when he found himself bound to an ancient platform. The mighty trap sprung. Blindsided. It caught Yitzchak unguarded, firmly entangled. 'He (Avraham) bound him on the altar, on top of the wood.'

Captured Yitzchak agreed to his father's request as he allowed himself to be positioned on the altar as if assisting his father to get the right slaughter angle were an animal tied there. Yitzchak played along unsuspectingly. How could he have entertained participating in barbarian, primitive, idolatrous practices? Note that Avraham had so far dispensed with the fire, a main pre-sacrificial preparation. The patriarch purposely held that in abeyance to foster subterfuge and further lure his victim, his son. Incongruous with normal burnt-offering protocol, the fire would have to come *after* his son was dead. From Yitzchak's perspective, without fire, he still maintained that this demonstrative object lesson of sacrifice playacting had not gone too far.

Not for long. In a split second, Yitzchak snapped out of his denial. The *akedah*'s conclusion cascaded too quickly. 'And Avraham reached with his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.' Avraham placed his left hand on his son's outstretched throat, preparing the trachea and esophagus for severing. He raised the knife with his right hand.

The simple truth shook loose the last vestiges of incredulity. No mistaking it. This was Avraham's greatest act, greatest sacrifice. Yitzchak waited as his heart pounded, terrified, knowing that at his father's hand, he would join the holiest burnt offerings of Adam, Hevel, and Noach. Silently still, immobilized Yitzchak mouthed prayer.

It was heard.

'A *malach* of Hashem from heaven called his name and he said: "Avraham, Avraham." And he answered saying: "I am here, ready."' Like the other prophecies involving *malachim*, Avraham experienced this one via his physical senses (type three prophecy discussed in the first *aliyah* above). The *malach* repeated the patriarch's name, reflecting a split second standing between Yitzchak's life and death. Divine instruction screamed 'DON'T STRIKE THE YOUTH. DON'T LAY A FINGER ON HIM.' The Sages[76] suggest that

76. *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:7

Avraham intended to nick Yitzchak until prophetic instruction held him back. Yitzchak, in Heaven's eyes, gained the status of a burnt-offering[77] that may not be blemished in any way.

Unresolved is why Hashem apparently gave contradictory commandments. What did Hashem desire? Would Yitzchak live to inherit Avraham's legacy or was the *akedah* really meant to test the patriarch with actually carrying out the ultimate sacrifice? Possibly, Hashem employed nuance to further the Divine aim. Hashem allowed Avraham to truly believe that he had been requested to sacrificially slaughter and offer Yitzchak as a burnt-offering. Hashem wanted to bring Yitzchak to death's brink so that he and his descendants would bear the torch of abandoning rat races and skirt chases, choosing spiritual servitude and Divine embrace.

Hashem projected a message to Avraham using language that would lead him to understand the command one way while Hashem actually desired something altogether different. Simplifying the linguistic technicalities, Hashem told Avraham to take Yitzchak to one of the Moriah Mountains, and 'a sacrifice per the instruction that you will receive there.'[78] That is exactly what happened. On Mt. Moriah, Avraham was directed to sacrifice the ram. Since the verse now reads that Hashem stated that the *sacrifice object* was pending further instruction, it follows that regarding the specific *mountain*, He did not intend to issue a clarification. The particular Moriah peak was left to Avraham's discretion.

An alternative reconstruction of Hashem's command reads that He demanded that Avraham occupy himself with sacrificial activity and readiness but not the actual slaughter. The key word is the one defining the task. Read that Avraham was demanded to bring Yitzchak as *a stand-in for* a burnt-offering. How true that post-*akedah* Yitzchak gained a burnt-offering status or recognition.

Yet, an ambiguous heavenly communication has, potentially, stupendous ramifications. Imagine if such confusion occurred on Mt. Sinai. Taken to the extreme, one might fairly ask: Did Moshe bring down the correctly intended commandments or did he get it all garbled? Does not all prophetic experience stand or fall on the reliability and accuracy of its transmission? Apparently,

77. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 64:3

78. והעלהו שם לעולה - אשר אומר אליך

in this unique case Hashem chose to purposely throw Avraham off track to affect the *akedah* and its attendant Jewish Mystique. Bearing that in mind, we might even suggest that Hashem's statement was indeed a simple straightforward commandment to sacrifice his son. The Almighty intentionally, so to speak, tossed a curve ball to hide His real intent, which consistently was that no human slaughtering should take place that fateful day (and forevermore).

The Sages[79] underscore that Hashem's word is truth and slaying Yitzchak never had been Divinely entertained. Yitzchak's life personified the perfect, unblemished burnt-offering. The *akedah* forged his mystical persona, bringing him to higher consciousness. He secured his descendants' potential for personalizing an intimate relationship with the Almighty. An inseparable fusion to Divine Providence replaced nature's clutches.

The *malach* called: "Avraham, Avraham." The patriarch thought he was being urged to carry out the sacrifice, and replied "Here I am." *Yes. I am on the cusp of performing Your will.* The *malach* clarified that he had come to stay Avraham's hand.

The Torah testifies that after this final and crowning display of selflessness, the *malach* proclaimed that he now knew Avraham was Heaven-fearing. This referred to Avraham's unflinching religious readiness. The commandment's rationale was utterly beyond Avraham's comprehension. Slaughtering any human would be abhorrent. His own son – despicable. Spilling the blood of his miracle son – born to him at age one hundred and Sarah at ninety – required the suspension of any and all logic. Yet, the beloved servant thought of nothing but fulfilling his Master's will. No request was beyond his level of commitment. Subsequently and for all posterity, Avraham's dogged submission at the *akedah* serves as the ultimate human litmus test for the Heaven-fearing.

With every fiber of his being, Avraham desired to carry out the *akedah* so he could breathe the air of that monumental mountaintop, that peak of human achievement – fear of Heaven.[80] The *malach* informed him that Hashem knew now, as He had before, that Avraham was every inch the soldier the Commander-in-Chief could possibly hope for. There was no need to carry out the illogical act in a display of loyalty that He knew permeated the patriarch's essence.

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79. BT *Taanit* 4a
80. Cf. *Devarim* 10:12

Alternatively, the verse reads as the *malach*'s own statement. As mentioned above,[81] these beings are not necessarily in the know regarding particular bits of information. The heavenly messenger was quite blown away by the patriarch's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son. He now learned that Avraham's fear of Heaven was of a greater magnitude than that of the *malach* himself!

At this point, Hashem's Name used in the narrative shifts from *Elohim* – the Almighty, to the Four-Letter Ineffable Name. That change represents a seismic shift. The pair of patriarchs' display of intellect's mastery over the mundane would be repaid with their complete severance from any celestial or angelic influence. All forces *controlled* by the Almighty were relegated to irrelevance. The sum total of the father and son's reality was Hashem alone.

'And Avraham looked up and saw a ram. (Afterwards) to his surprise it was stuck by his horns in the briar. And he went and took the ram, offering it to replace his son.'

The *akedah* demanded closure. Rebuilding the altar and arranging the wood seemed purposeless. Casting a longing look around, Avraham noticed a ram. Its presence provided two miracles. One, Mt. Moriah was not a game preserve and no other flocks climbed up there. Two, the timing felt discordant. Minutes ago, Avraham had noticed that the animal roamed freely and shortly afterwards it stood frozen. Avraham reasoned that Hashem sent Yitzchak's replacement.

Different types of sacrifices are brought for various reasons. Significantly, Avraham did not offer this ram in thanksgiving, though the occasion pleaded loudly enough for celebration. The patriarch's choice of burnt-offering suggested that he owed ransom for Yitzchak's release. The inexplicable way the ram was suddenly, miraculously entangled lent the persuasive likelihood that it would serve that purpose. Rabbinic tradition[82] relates the import of this particular ram, teaching that Hashem had it planted from time's dawn. Hashem planned on the miraculous ram replacement far, far in advance.

'And Avraham called out in prayer to Hashem (whose *Shechinah* would dwell) in that place.' He begged, 'Hashem, look what will be said about this day. "Look what happened on the mountain of Hashem."' A DNA analysis of

81. See second *aliyah*
82. *Mishnah Avot* 5:6

the altar remains would produce a match with a ram, not Yitzchak. People would say that Avraham was a fraud and imposter.

Avraham thus remained determined to carry out what he had originally come for, pleading for permission. 'And the *malach* Hashem called to Avraham a second time from heaven.' Prophecy praised the patriarch's will but scrapped his plan. 'Because I will certainly bless you and multiply your seed like the heaven's stars, like the strand's sands. Your descendants will inherit your enemies' gates.'

Why did Hashem echo the blessings promised on the occasions of the severed-animal and circumcision covenants? 'And through your descendants will the world's nations be blessed on account of your heeding My voice.' The *akedah*'s essence came out as Avraham learned the full truth. The early covenantal prophecies had been conditional. All of Jewish history was riding, so to speak, on the successful outcome of Avraham's challenge. Passing the *akedah* achieved an unprecedented standard of relating to Hashem. As such it tied a rock-solid knot with the Creator. His willingness to slaughter an only son proved that because of his zealousness, nothing could or would stand in his way to please Hashem. The Almighty's covenant's culmination moved from potential to realization. Blessings burst from heaven. They showered upon dazed, rope-burned Yitzchak.

Readers might wonder how Hashem could unequivocally promise the fulfillment of blessings when they were conditional on Avraham performing a particular duty. A parable helps clarify the answer. A doctor swears that he will cure his patient. He then prescribes medication. Certainly the physician had that in mind at the time of his oath. Similarly, Hashem knew all along that the *akedah* was in the cards, and He had no doubt that the patriarch would perform admirably.

The benedictions countered the effects of the *akedah* had Avraham's knife actually pierced Yitzchak's flesh. Three antitheses emerged.

- Abundant seed corresponded to the end of Avraham's seed, had he followed through on the slaying. The promise reached his ears, telling him of descendants likened to stars and sands. It foretold the Jewish Nation's progeny consisting of mighty kings, discerning prophets in addition to a vast array of pious scholars. These outstanding Jewish pioneers radiated with starry brilliance. Grains of sand symbolized the balance of religious masses.

- Inheritance of Israel faced forfeiture since no children would have lived to receive the Holy Land. The second blessing promised the people their homeland. Jewish conquest had been assured. Enemies thwarted and repelled on the battlefield would be similarly removed from walled cities. Jewish territorial integrity had Hashem's assurances.
- Sacrificing Yitzchak would have disgraced Avraham, eternally stigmatizing him as his son's murderer. Instead of gaining world reverence and hero status, he would have become a damned byword, a despicably cursed traitor. Hissing detractors would have grown in number and intensity until he found no respite. He would be doomed to a lonely, haunted existence. Divine compassion snatched Avraham from ignominy. Instead, glory was presented to the patriarch, civilization's finest. Hashem capped His servant's brave, lonely voyage. On top of an isolated mountain, the *akedah* became celebrated. It decorated Avraham on heaven and earth.

These promises were not an eternal reward for his circumcision, though that certainly bestowed upon him untold merit. The *akedah*, ultimately, had set the patriarch apart. Cumulatively, decades of heavenly service testified that reward accrued 'because he heeded the Almighty's call.'

'And Avraham returned to his attendants. They got up and together walked to Beer Sheva. And Avraham dwelled in Beer Sheva.' By the verse singling out Avraham's return, one wonders where Yitzchak went. Indirectly the discussion also turns to Sarah. Where was she? *Parashat Chayei Sarah* teaches that the matriarch was not in Beer Sheva but rather in Chevron. There we will see what precipitated her arrival there.[83]

It is likely that Sarah caught wind of her husband's journey towards Mt. Moriah. One can well imagine her frantic bombardment of questions. Where were they last seen? Why did Yitzchak carry the donkey's altar wood on his back? What was Avraham planning on doing with the fire, wood, and knife? Echoing Yitzchak's question to his father as they walked alone, Sarah may have wondered: Where was the sacrificial lamb? Knowing her husband's indomitable will, she might have strung together the pieces. Racing, anguished thoughts gave no respite as she contemplated the incomprehensible. Did her husband sacrifice her son on Mt. Moriah?

83. See chapter five, first *aliyah*

Anticipating Sarah's fright, the patriarch dispatched their son to his mother in Chevron to quiet her angst. He insisted that the matriarch share in the revelation. It was the patriarch's most meaningful and happiest day and he very much wanted Sarah to rejoice in celebration of Hashem's miracles and promises.

Yitzchak took the quickest road. Avraham retraced the *akedah*'s footsteps. Rejoined with his attendants, the patriarch set his sights on Beer Sheva and a religious life of contemplation and deed. The next *parashah*'s opening verses support the position that Avraham dwelled in Beer Sheva, while Sarah and Yitzchak resided in Chevron. The verse says that only Avraham came to Chevron to eulogize and cry for Sarah.

Avraham 'going together with his attendants to Beer Sheva' suggests that he revealed Moriah's miracles to them. Only in that way were the three travelers of one heart, one resolve. Their initial joint journey to Moriah bears no such description. They had no idea what the patriarch's plans were at the time.

The *parashah* concludes with the patriarch's lineage back in former Aram Naharaim. 'After these events, Avraham was told that "Milcah also had sons with your brother Nachor."' The Sages[84] suggest that Milcah was Sarah's sister and that Nachor, like Avraham, fathered children late in life. Milcah had her first child at the same time as her sibling Sarah. Given the reasonable distance between Canaan and Aram Naharaim, it can be fairly assumed that Avraham, Nachor, Sarah, and Milcah corresponded regularly. Avraham thus knew of his Aramean nephews well before the *akedah*. The phrase 'after these events' references the same time frame as it does in the opening verse of this *aliyah*. Namely, some time after Yitzchak's birth, Yishmael's ouster, and Avimelech's ardor, Avraham (in addition to the *akedah* saga) was told of a worthy *shidduch* for Yitzchak. Clearly, the main point of tracing the lineage here has to do with Rivkah's birth. The second matriarch's family circumstances rendered her a fitting match.

The Torah's *akedah* juxtaposition to Rivkah's lineage implies a cause and effect relationship. Yitzchak's participation in the Divine scheme provided merit whereby he married Rivkah, a woman from an excellent family. Avraham's journey that distanced him from his father's household and homeland would now come full circle. The two branches of Terach's illustrious family were shortly joined in matrimony, in destiny.

84. *Targum Yonatan* to *Bereshit* 22:2

CHAPTER FIVE

PARASHAT CHAYEI SARAH

HOME FOR GOOD

First *aliyah*

'And Sarah's life was one hundred twenty and seven years. Sarah lived a full life during those years.'

For Sarah, typical life phases assumed unusual time frames. Her youth extended longer than that of other women because of her giving birth to Yitzchak at age ninety and his subsequent nursing. Thus her childbearing years, youth's hallmark, spanned *one hundred* years. Sarah's graceful old age began after that time, lasting *twenty* years. The matriarch's final *seven* years witnessed a noticeable decline in function. Frailty set in. Her entire lifespan was marked, overall, with pleasantness and serenity.

'And Sarah died in Kiryat Arba.' It is important to fill in the gap years. Before the *akedah*, the family resided in Beer Sheva. In this *parashah*, we find Sarah (and most likely Yitzchak) living in Chevron. Avraham is the big question mark. Where was he and why did the family appear to be split? What follows is a plausible working answer.

Sarah's final years were spent in Kiryat Arba-Chevron locating a suitable environment for her family's needs. She suddenly passed away, separated from Avraham who was in Beer Sheva at the time. Presumably, he remained there in order to finalize the moving arrangements. Sarah went ahead to set up the homestead. Recall that Yitzchak had gone to his mother (still in Beer Sheva) immediately after the *akedah* to share the momentous occasion with her. At some unspecified time, the patriarch contemplated moving everyone to Chevron. The forefather's moving plan called for Sarah and Yitzchak in the vanguard.

With this first phase set into motion, Avraham arrived alone from Beer Sheva to mourn and bury Sarah. What prompted the patriarch, well-advanced in years, to make such an arduous move from Beer Sheva in Pelishtim?

A deep yearning for Canaan[1] generated Chevron's appeal to Avraham. He preferred to spend his and Sarah's final years there. The prospect of sudden death and interment outside of Canaan were discomfiting. Within Israel, historical Chevron was attractive because of the tradition attesting to Adam and Chavah's burial there. Cleverly, Avraham had sent Sarah ahead for a second reason. She was asked to initiate burial plot negotiations in order to deflate seller Efron's bargaining position. Avraham's presence at the negotiating table at this crucial and delicate outset would have clearly signaled to Efron, the city's kingpin, *me'arat hamachpelah's* intrinsic value. That could have cramped if not nixed any deal. It ultimately became a moot point since Sarah died suddenly, her husband miles away journeying from Beer Sheva.

'And Avraham came to eulogize Sarah and cry for her.' The patriarch had been deprived of his last farewell to his beloved Sarah before her demise. The Torah does not make mention of the words and sentiments shared at her funeral. One can only guess at the memories, praise, and devastation he felt and shared with the throngs who came to listen how he described a marriage that far surpassed its diamond anniversary and approximated a century.[2] Cherishingly, Avraham looked tenderly at the woman who courageously journeyed beside him for an entire lifetime; he wept inconsolably. Thinking only of Sarah's legacy, Avraham drew strength and befittingly eulogized his confidante, compass, and sanctuary. Chevron's residents crowded to hear the moving and inspiring stories. A chunk of his own flesh had been cut away. His temple demolished, his world darkened. Avraham could now just shuffle through the rest of his life, crushed.[3] He took her lifeless face in his hands and brought it to his own, weeping inconsolably.

Seeing the bereaved husband's profound distress, the townsfolk came over to comfort him. Steadying himself, Avraham finished eulogizing Sarah, his timeless princess. He arose, turning to the business of procuring a burial spot so suddenly foisted upon him.

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1. Abravanel apparently understands that Pelishtim was not part of Canaan proper and of lesser sanctity. See chapter six, first *aliyah* regarding Yitzchak dwelling in Gerar.
2. See chapter two, seventh *aliyah*. Avraham married Sarah at about age 40.
3. Cf. BT *Sanhedrin* 22a

Turning to the Chevron locals Avraham publicly begged for compassion. He entreated, 'I am a stranger now, but I intend to settle here. Please, extend to me a burial plot from among yours. I (must) bury my deceased, lying in front of me.' Avraham publicly described his vulnerable and awkward plight by acknowledging that, at present, he lacked legal citizenship or even resident status. Despite his stateless limbo, Avraham explained to the crowd that he considered Chevron his only home. He would never leave it. Appealing to the locals' heart and purse strings, Avraham intimated that by granting his request, pecuniary advantage would accrue to Chevron. He alluded to great promise. One cemetery plot sale now in exchange for many future favors to Chevron's citizens for as long as he lived. Asking for a small section of their vast burial lands to call his own, coupled with intimating that he only wanted it due to the current pressing circumstance, was a genius gambit because it downplayed the *me'arah*'s importance. And it worked.

In unified and vocal praise, 'the people of Chet answered and said to Avraham: "My lord, listen. You are a heavenly prince in our midst. Select our choicest burial plot and bury your dead there."' Of course, they knew Avraham's life story and his manifestly close relationship with Hashem. In chorus they clamored with promises that nothing would be withheld. Chet offered to allow Avraham to bury Sarah in the fanciest memorial park they had alongside their aristocrats. He had the prerogative to name any spot at all. Adam and Chavah's storied graveyard was in reach of the Jewish Nation as the patriarch foresaw it befitting Yitzchak, Rivkah, Yaakov, and Leah's final resting place. The covenant with Hashem established Avraham and Sarah as the progenitors of a divine people to occupy all Canaan. How justified for the present and future patriarchs and matriarchs to find rest beside Hashem's first human creations.

The townspeople prodded Avraham to proceed with the burial so he would not lose himself in lament once again. The patriarch was ready to acquiesce, but had someplace particular in mind. So Avraham 'bowed (in gratitude) to the Chittite common folk. He spoke with them saying: "If you are so inclined that I bury my deceased from before me then speak with Efron."' When the Chittites promised, in one accord, that none among them would withhold any area, Efron, the owner of Me'arat HaMachpelah was present and raised no protest. A problem arose because the man was loaded. It would

be far beneath his station and dignity to sell *any* of his extensive real estate holdings. He needed some Chet-folk cajoling.

Avraham's only other option was to take his wife's body back to Beer Sheva where he owned land. He had no interest in taking the *me'arah* as a handout. How tacky to bury one's wife on borrowed land. The patriarch would certainly not agree to bury Sarah in some other family's section. Burying righteous Sarah alongside corrupt Canaanites would also be distasteful.

Without a slightest doubt, had Avraham directed his appeal to Efron it would have tipped him off to the *me'arah*'s significance. Love or money would not have budged the tony aristocrat to part with his territory, power. But now, the people effectively did Avraham's bidding. Efron could not publicly lose face and appear as the one to oppose public weal. Swept along with popular sentiment, Efron seized the high road. 'And Efron the Chittite answered Avraham in the presence of those at the city's gate. "No my lord."' *I have no wish to hear nor care for the town's arguments. I'm here to please you.* ' "Listen here. I give you the field."' He offered Avraham a gift of his entire field together with the *me'arah*.

But the patriarch abhorred presents. Avraham spoke in front of the whole town to nail Efron to his offer. He graciously accepted – with one caveat. There must be a strike price, and it would be paid up front, before the burial. In short shrift, the patriarch exposed Efron. The governor demurred. 'What is money between friends? Are not four hundred pure talents of silver insignificant when dearest friends (are involved)? Bury the deceased first.' Efron probably named the price that he had paid for the property, a good and valuable consideration. Or he may have overcharged, noticing Avraham's insistence on a quick deal. Clearly, he did not want to stand on ceremony, thinking that the money could be paid at a comfortable time and place.

Avraham saw right through Efron's typical Mid-Eastern jockeying and insisted on paying up front. In the presence of everyone, Avraham weighed out every last silver talent, handing it over to Efron's city escrow agent as the Torah writes the cash was 'given over to the merchant.' This arrangement allowed Efron to avoid the indignity of counting the money in front of all the assembled.

Second *aliyah*

'And Efron's field in the vicinity of machpelah in Mamre changed ownership. [It included] the field and the me'arah in it and all of the trees in the field bordering all around (the property).'

The money exchanged initiated and Sarah's burial finalized the land transfer. The matriarch was laid to rest close to Chavah, adjacent to Adam. In coveted Canaan, home for good. Exclusive use of this area as a family burial plot was thus concretized. Indisputably, Chevron's *me'arah* and adjacent fields had been purchased by the patriarch in perpetuity, publicly witnessed. The sale terms made it explicit that the hallowed spot would not be used for anyone other than Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov's family. The forefather would not abide Sarah's honor to be compromised.

A separate issue may have come to a head due to local zoning laws. Even though Efron had sold his property, Avraham could not undermine city planning and extend the cemetery to include the surrounding fields without municipal consent. A seemingly superfluous verse alludes to this. 'The field and the *me'arah* within it transferred to Avraham for burial purposes from (the authority of) the people of Chet.' Thus the Torah records two events. One, Avraham became the *bone fide* owner of the purchased property. Two, municipal ordinances reflected this new designation and usage.

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The Torah writes explicitly about Avraham's cemetery plot purchase. The protracted negotiations are recorded for posterity. Buried in these picayune details, an insightful point can easily get overlooked. Why does Judaism insist on interment at all, and what significance is there in procuring a particular spot? Does it really matter to the deceased?

The concept and precept of Jewish burial is important and crucial on three distinct levels. Firstly, human bodies are delicately and finely balanced. Even the slightest jolt to its vital systems upsets its functioning. What, then, occurs to a body when life ceases? It immediately and aggressively begins decomposition at a pace that makes human corpses more odious and repelling than that of animals. Timely burial spares others the offense of a body's putridity and insalubrious effect on the environment.

Secondly, proper body care is necessary for the eternal soul. Death marks the onset of man's two essential components returning to their basic form. The body disintegrates into earth's dust from where it came and the soul, too, departs to its heavenly source whence it was chiseled. According to tradition there is a twelve month timeframe during which a soul is in flux, so to speak, between heaven and earth, unsure of whether to reattach to its physical casing or its heavenly home.[4] Final physical decomposition gives the soul a boost to the heavenly source from where it had originally been taken. That marks an end of the soul's earthly visit. Burying the body expedites its journey home.

A third aspect of burial relates to an individual's unique usage of his body and soul. At conception man is forged in the Divine image. Throughout his life, ideally he toils in nurturing the body/soul fusion into a holy vessel. Each person crafts his own space while defining his character. Interment, then, is existentially requisite for the human psyche and emotional wellbeing. Viewing a decomposing body upsets people for it deeply frustrates and obsessively distracts them. Debilitating thoughts gnaw: Does our life's work conclude no differently than casually discarded bone heaps? Of course, this is untenable and fundamentally erroneous. Man created in Heaven's image shares nothing with a brute pack mule.

A proper and dignified burial underscores this religious tenet. Sections of *Bamidbar*[5] and *Devarim*[6] intimate this fact by recounting Hashem's insistence on concealing Aharon's deceased body from everyone except his brother Moshe and son Elazar. More marked still was Moshe's case. Due to his towering stature no man viewed his lifeless body. Both his death and burial spot have been eternally concealed from all mankind.

The discussion now turns to particular graveyard spot selection. Unquestionably, prominent placement properly honors the deceased. The position within a cemetery indicates whether this person was royalty, righteous, or rank and file. Israel's first King, Shaul, was buried in his family plot[7] and did not warrant a royal designation because his improper deeds removed

4. BT *Shabbat* 152b
5. 20:22–29
6. 34:6
7. See *Shmuel* I 31:13

him from the land's highest office. On the other hand, King David merited a special burial placement apart from his biological family.[8]

In addition, just as each eternal soul inhabits its own heavenly niche after death,[9] subject to its accomplishments and achievements during its earthly sojourn,[10] bodies left behind should have clear-cut burial guidelines, requirements, and restrictions. This idea is dramatically borne out by the hasty burial of a common combatant in the Prophet Elisha's tomb.[11] The affront to the holy man was such that Hashem resurrected this just-killed soldier to prevent further contact between those two bodies.

Certain places are more suited for burial than others. An ideal cemetery location places an emphasis on the areas more appropriate for bodily decomposition, providing accelerated soul atonement. A pious person's burial plot also assumes a hallowed status, similar to a *Sefer* Torah's mantle. Righteous peers deserve to be shrouded by their counterparts' sanctified grounds.

Returning full circle to Avraham's choice for Sarah, it should be understood that the patriarch's *me'arat haMachpelah* choice had been taken with great forethought. The tradition got passed down to Yaakov who enjoined Yosef to bring him to Chevron for burial.[12] On the whole, this passage's object lesson contains a timeless Jewish ethic that mirrors Chevron's physical two-tiered cave. The burial protocol encompasses the sum total of man's duality.

Readers come away from this narrative with enhanced sensitivities for:

- *Eretz Yisrael*
- *Me'arat haMachpelah*
- The imperative of expeditious burial, particularly in sacred soil

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'Avraham was old, advanced in years; and Hashem had blessed Avraham throughout.' The verse uses two adjectives to demarcate Avraham's age. Note in *Tanach* the term "advanced" follows the word "old" but never replaces it whereas the term "old" can be used alone. Old age includes three distinct segments – a beginning, middle, and end. The onset of old age is generic, in

8. *Melachim* I 2:10
9. See also Abravanel to *Devarim* 25:5, the introduction to *Yeshayahu,* and *Yechezkel* 37 for a discussion on transmigration.
10. Cf. BT *Shabbat* 152a
11. Melachim II 13
12. See chapter twelve, first *aliyah*

a sense, and follows youth or middle age. Frailty refers to the other extreme and designates pre-death. It also matches up with terms like "sated" or "well-advanced in years" and is often combined with the word "old." The middle elderly passage spans a wide wedge of one's lifespan. This verse pegs Avraham at the middle category of old age. Thus when Avraham turned one hundred he was described as "old, advanced in years." After Sarah passed away, the patriarch was still in the same elderly middle category despite the fact that thirty-seven years had elapsed. (Avraham was ten years older than Sarah.) Old age's mid-section can be of a long duration.

Similarly, a person's youth has a beginning, middle, and end. Sometimes *Tanach* writes about an embryo as a "youth."[13] A three-month old baby is a youth.[14] Teenagers, too, are called youths.[15] The outer reaches of youth stretch to thirty years of age[16] or even to sixty.[17] In sum, in *Tanach* youth and old age are loosely defined demarcation points. Both segregate into three subdivisions.

The current verse thus contrasts Avraham's youth with his senescence and beyond. His younger years transpired in native Charan. Pain, struggle, and suffering characterized those early decades. From age seventy-five to the present one hundred and forty, 'Hashem blessed Avraham throughout.' The blessings manifested in the patriarch's wealth, prestige, and piety. His golden years were boon years.

At this advanced age Avraham did not know, of course, how many years he had left. Spurning further delay, the patriarch made Yitzchak's marriage a number one priority. Why did Avraham have Eliezer arrange it? Eliezer of Damascus had earned Avraham's unwavering trust and confidence. By virtue of his loyalty that spanned decades of valor, tested by uncanny battlefield prowess, impeccable fiduciary responsibility, and personal integrity, Eliezer rose to become his master's right-hand man, best friend, property trustee and steward. Avraham knew that if he were to pass on before arranging his son's matrimony, Eliezer's word would be as good as his own for Yitzchak.

Besides Avraham's age, another reason prevented him from travelling to Aram Naharaim. His jumbo estate holdings required round-the-clock

13. *Shoftim* 13:5
14. *Shmot* 2:6
15. Chapter four, fifth *aliyah*
16. Chapter eleven, first *aliyah*
17. *Shmot* 33:11

supervision. He could not pry himself away. Sending Yitzchak away from the homestead was also out of the question.

Finally, when the Torah writes about Avraham's elderliness and Heavenly blessing, it alludes to the utter lack of interest in securing a sizeable dowry for Yitzchak. Avraham, preparing for the World to Come and prosperous in his own right, did not need to seek extra money.

Avraham explained to Eliezer which young woman would be a fit match. Clearly, the patriarch took matrimony very seriously and he 'made his servant take an oath in Hashem's Name, Ruler of heaven and earth: "Do not bring my son a girl from the Canaanites I dwell amongst."' Avraham emphasized the match-breaker and Eliezer understood that even Canaan's wealthiest family would not do. He continued. 'Rather, journey to my birth district, my homeland. From there take a wife for my son Yitzchak.' The patriarch eyed posterity. Character and family, alone, were the sole criteria. Avraham did not care if the girl's family could not put together a single dinar dowry. Yitzchak undoubtedly took part in his wife's search discussion despite the Torah not mentioning it. He was well aware of what kind of girl he dare not bring home. The emphasis centered on Eliezer since he would be in a position to carry out the task. He needed to be firmly cautioned against any underhandedness in this most fateful mission yet.

Consummating an oath, Avraham demanded of Eliezer: 'Place your hand on (near) my leg.' The intent was that Avraham needed him to be true to the patriarch and their mutual belief system. Specifically, Avraham's circumcision set him apart as a believer in Providence on heaven and earth. Inter alia it included the belief that no other celestial beings have independent power, and that the Almighty is heavily, actively involved in running world affairs.

The Torah does not mean that Eliezer actually touched Avraham's genitals. How crude. The servant pledged allegiance by placing his hand under Avraham's leg as a reminder of Hashem's covenant.

Avraham's decision to look outside of Canaan for Yitzchak's wife seems curious. What did he intend by it and what, in his estimation, made the local Canaanite ladies so different from those hailing from distant Aram? Had the patriarch not forged close relationships with Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre, fighting side by side? Not to mention signing peace accords with King Avimelech? Did Avraham have a confidante closer than Eliezer? All were Canaanites.

Avraham, recall, had personally been greatly influenced and mentored by Noach. Noach pronounced a curse on Cham, the Canaanite progenitor. For the patriarch that bespoke volumes. Intermarriage would be tantamount to betrayal. Avraham, the descendant of Shem, pursued Divine blessing. Mixing blood would make for bad blood. The Divine Promise gave the Land of Israel to the patriarch. Cham's descendants were not entitled to the Holy Land and Avraham was not about to let them in, so to speak, through the back door.

One commentary[18] offers another angle that provides a fresh perspective on Avraham's adamancy. Consider the following general observation regarding the Torah's commandments and prohibitions. Certain aspects of Torah law, such as that portion emphasizing character perfection and behavioral precepts, are aimed at impacting a Jew's body and soul. The Torah's other goal takes exclusive aim for the soul through articles of faith, belief and creeds.

Undesirable and abhorrent traits like malice, revenge, cruelty, promiscuity, greed, and the like attach to a soul insofar as they are personality flaws. Human bodies also incorporate these traits and they tangibly attach to a person's physiology. An angry person can get chronic high blood pressure burned into his biological hard drive, and that trait is passed down to his progeny who will have inherited short fuses. By contrast, false credo, evil and bogus as it is, is not subject to indelible genetic imprinting.

Dissecting the two systems, the patriarch concluded that while Aram's skewed, superficial and pagan world outlook was repugnant, it was not transgenerational. Philosophies, he reasoned, were superficial and not inherent. Not so with the Canaanites. Avraham stood emphatic and determined that Yitzchak not marry into Canaan's accursed, acutely carved coding.

Avraham had cause for concern that Eliezer might be tempted to arrange a match with Avraham's well-heeled Canaanite neighbors and allies, Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre. After Avraham passed on, Eliezer could easily shift loyalties to those deeply beloved fellow countrymen. Their money could talk to Eliezer. He might wheedle Yitzchak into agreeing to a *shidduch* with one of their daughters, with the prospects of untold wealth and continued assistance contingent on tying the knot. Avraham therefore focused his attention on 'Canaanites he dwelled amongst' – the affluent allies – thus pouring cold water on any concoctions that might enter Eliezer's head.

18. *Derashot HaRan* 5

An overall picture had formed in Eliezer's head. Yet further clarification needed fine-tuning. 'And the servant asked: "Perhaps the woman will not want to follow after me (to Canaan)?"' Clearly, Eliezer did not consider moving the *chatan* to Aram as a real option. The servant was well aware of Avraham's history, and Yitzchak moving back to his father's birthplace was out of the question. Yitzchak would never, at any rate, abandon his father to follow his wife to her homeland. Nor was Eliezer concerned that a contingent relocation to Canaan might diminish Yitzchak's desirability for a prospective bride. Marrying a sole heir of the internationally renowned Prince of Hashem was not an offer to refuse.

Eliezer probed his master for a response: What if she insisted on Yitzchak traveling to Aram in person to fetch her? The girl might think it beneath her station to make that journey merely accompanied by domestic help. Avraham answered unequivocally: there was no way Yitzchak was budging – even for a short excursion. Canaan was a comely land with rotten folk; the opposite of Aram.

Why was Avraham so insistent that Yitzchak not go to pick his wife up from Aram? First, Avraham was confident that Hashem telling him to leave his birthplace indicated that neither he nor his son should ever set foot in that land again. Secondly, since Canaan was promised to Avraham's descendants, even a short trip abroad would smack of rejecting the Holy Land's stupendous gift. Mystically, the *akedah* transformed Yitzchak, as it were, into a sacrificial object. His sanctity determined that the Holy Land held Yitzchak tight, never letting go.

Avraham therefore felt certain that Eliezer's mission would succeed. '[Hashem] will send His *malach* before you and you will find a wife for my son from there.' Any breach or deviation from Avraham's explicit warning carried the gravest consequences. Eliezer did elicit a concession. If, after all his efforts this mission failed, the servant would not be subject to his master's wrath. Damascus Eliezer packed.

Third *aliyah*

'And the servant brought ten of his master's camels, laden with samplings of his master's wealth. He arose, went to Nachor's city in Aram Naharaim.'

Eliezer completed his travel arrangements quickly. Besides his dedication to Avraham's wishes, he wanted to dispel his master's concerns that after his death, Eliezer would succumb to pressure and expediency and marry Yitzchak off to one of Aner, Eshkol, or Mamre's daughters. The valet understood the best way to calm Avraham would be to get the job done right, fast.

Laden with valuables, a contingent set out for the place where Avraham had relatives, for Aram. Avraham had long made it known that he anticipated to marry Yizhak into his brother Nachor's family. 'And he (Eliezer) rested the camels next to a spring outside of the city. It was evening which was when girls came to draw water.' Late afternoon watering was a typical practice because earlier in the day the hot sun made the job too arduous. Others arrived in the early morning before the sun scorched. Parking near a spring, Eliezer calculated, would be fortuitous since it had been so for both Hagar[19] and Avraham's *eshel*.[20] Their respective prayers were answered next to fresh water.

Eliezer meditated. 'He said: "Almighty Hashem of my master, Avraham. Have fortune chance my way today. Be kind to my master Avraham."' Eliezer, under Avraham's tutelage, had long been weaned of empty and foolish superstitions. Wishing for passing, casual *mazal* was not what he had learned in his master's service. Basic religiosity posited that Divine Providence, not fatalism, guides events. Attributing life to random chance cheats Heaven out of the picture and is patently false.

This important concept needs a better explanation because it tends to confuse. Jewish thought does not entertain the belief in happenstance. Hashem's Providence and Knowledge encompass everything.[21] However from a man's perspective, busy with day to day affairs and oblivious to creation's big picture, stuff bounces at him. Mistakenly or simplistically he believes chains of events are formed by a disconnected jumble. It does not mean that there

19. Chapter four, fifth *aliyah*
20. Chapter four, sixth *aliyah*
21. Cf. *Ralbag Milchamot* II:2. Abravanel in multiple places fiercely objects to *Ralbag's* opinion on the Divine pre-knowledge of chance occurrence.

was no Designer of those events. It does mean that Man's puny panorama precludes perceiving Providence.

Eliezer's attitude captured this. While on the one hand he engaged in prayerful meditation, his words' content indicated success would come as a stroke of good fortune. The servant spoke to Hashem from his own perspective where he would tend to chalk events to luck, but he fully acknowledged Hashem's mysterious, guiding hand.[22]

Reticence marked Eliezer's prayer to heaven. Unlike Avraham who addressed the Almighty of the heaven and earth, Eliezer humbly deferred to Hashem as Avraham's Almighty One. The supplication's content centered on his speedy success so that he would be spared knocking door to door looking for Yitzchak's *bascherte*. The servant hoped that Divine assistance would expedite matters, and even bring an appropriate Heaven-fearing woman his way. A rapidly wrapped *shidduch* would overjoy Avraham.

What specifically did Eliezer picture in his mind's eye as he *davened*? 'Here I am at the spring. The local girls come to draw water.' Apropos of the unfolding scene, Eliezer designed his test to conform to what he understood to be Yitzchak's wish list. The patriarch's wife needed, first and foremost, to embody kindness. Thoughtfulness in the context of a spring had to do with sharing water graciously.

Eliezer could have easily leaned over and drunk from the spring to his heart's content. His sizeable staff was not lazy and they had certainly packed proper well-drawing equipment to facilitate watering their camels. 'The maiden (I randomly select) whom I ask to tilt her pitcher so I will drink' – and doesn't respond by telling me to get it myself, but rather volunteers 'to give me drink and then insists on providing water to my camels' – despite the entourage and implements available – 'is the perfect one for Yitzchak, Your [Hashem's] servant.' Such a response would reflect kindheartedness, alacrity, and smarts. The maiden would conceive of the explanations for the servant's strange request – perhaps his entourage consisted of noblemen unaccustomed to drinking directly from a spring or attending to camels. Or they might be ill, unable to take care of themselves.

Eliezer should not be construed as derelict in this matchmaking process by basing his decision on a single test. Insight and experience taught him that

22. Yaakov echoed the same sentiments. See chapter six, fifth *aliyah*

dominant personality traits often get expressed through little things. For example, key kind but scant words or even tiny gestures might augur foresight, ingenuity, and resourcefulness. Eliezer's test amounted to floating a trial balloon but no more than that. He never intended to seal Yitzchak's bride search based solely on procuring water. Rather, intuition told him that a good first impression was worthwhile to follow up on. Specifically, the servant would perform his due diligence by checking out the woman's family, temperament, and modesty. Finally, Eliezer knew his master's open-house policy. He would not bring back a woman who objected to hosting guests. The *bascherte* needed to exude warmth.

Hashem's Providence mirrored Eliezer's mouthed prayer, perfectly. 'And it happened that before he finished meditative musings, Rivkah emerged. Born to Betuel, who was Milcah and Nachor's son, she was Avraham's great niece. On her shoulder, a water jug rested.' The Torah spelled out that Betuel had been born from Nachor's wife because Reumah, a concubine, had also borne Nachor sons. 'The young woman was strikingly beautiful, thoroughly virtuous. Going down to the spring, she filled her jug and came back up.'

Eliezer noticed her immediately, observed how she stood apart from girls her age. Atypically she did not flit around, turning the job into a needlessly drawn out excursion. Her speed caught Eliezer off balance because she started back home while others dallied and joked. 'The servant ran towards her. He asked: "Please share some water from your jug with me so I can drink."' (Eliezer had placed himself between the spring and the town. Otherwise he would have run from behind her rather than toward her.)

Legitimately, Rivkah could easily have pointed and directed the stranger to the well. She could have pouted about having to retrace her steps from the well when he could have gone over and asked her while she was still there. Instead she answered respectfully. ' "Drink, sir." She quickly lowered her jug and gave him water to drink.' Not looking to save herself trouble, she insisted on serving him. No sooner had he finished drinking than she initiated conversation, volunteering to draw water for the man's camels. Her selfless offer showed that it did not matter how much water camels were capable of quaffing. A close reading reveals that Rivkah's words, while similar to Eliezer's, incorporated more wit. The servant's prayer considered a woman who would offer to actually have the camels drink. Rivkah suggested only drawing water

because she had no way of knowing if the dromedaries would actually drink it. She followed through with celerity, as the Torah writes that 'she drew water for all of his camels.'

Floored, Eliezer barely managed a simple, positive acceptance nod. 'The man was astonished at her.' Rivkah's introduction could not have been more stunning. He silently took in her words and deeds, 'waiting to know if Hashem provided him (with Yitzchak's wife) or not.' Would she draw water for all his camels?

When she completed that task with dizzying speed, the servant reached into his trunk. 'And when the camels finished drinking, the man took a gold nose ring weighing half a shekel, prepared to hand her (also) two golden bracelets worth ten weights.' Likely he readied Rivkah's gift but did not actually hand it over until she answered his first question: 'Who are you (i.e. your family)?' Practical and logistical questions followed. When Rivkah answered that she was Betuel's daughter and described the family's ample lodging and stables, Eliezer lavished her with gifts. 'In thanksgiving the man prostrated himself to the Almighty.'

Before beginning the next *aliyah*, an important question begs elucidation. The Torah strictly forbids practicing sorcery and black-magic. Many forms of this outlawed hocus-pocus exist. One includes a person either doing or refraining from doing something based on arbitrary events. For example, if a man sees a black cat cross his path and pronounces the event as inauspicious, crawling back into bed, he has violated a commandment.[23] Can Eliezer's test of Rivkah be thus categorized? He did, after all, link her act of kindness at the spring to a seemingly unrelated marriage proposal on Yitzchak's behalf.

Avraham's servant did not invoke voodoo. The parameters of permissibility depend on whether the association between the events and consequences carries logic or is detached from reason. Clearly, if a farmer announces his intention to sow his field if it rains in the evening he has not performed sorcery since that is not illogical. Eliezer understood that Yitzchak's background and life were all indelibly guided by miracle and Providence. He knew, too, that the search for the young master's wife would likely continue in an established supernatural pattern. The servant conditioned Yizhak's matrimony on that woman displaying outstanding character and virtue. Rivkah's measured words

23. See *Vayikra* 19:26 and *Rashi* ad loc

and altruism validated and vindicated Eliezer's supposition. Scripting and orchestrating the young woman's task made sense. Besides, that deed was not used as the only telltale sign. Eliezer had screened her with additional questions, and subjected her to critical scrutiny. The Sages[24] place King Shaul's son, Yehonatan, in the same category.[25] He devised a test to determine whether he and his arms bearer should attack a Pelishti camp in face of impossible odds. Since his experiment was a sound method of deciding the dilemma (i.e. whether the enemy troops were scared of their own shadows), there was no transgression involved.[26] Talmudic Sages and *halachic* authorities have written about this subject at length. This treatment has been kept brief but is in keeping with the Rambam's opinion.[27]

Fourth *aliyah*

'And he (Eliezer) said: "Bless the Almighty, Hashem of my master Avraham Who has not removed His compassion and truth from my master. Hashem put me on the path to my master's brothers' household."'

Rivkah dashed back to the city to share the exciting news. 'And the young woman ran and told it to her mother's household.' Rivkah naturally confided more readily in her mother. Sparing no detail, the family learned of Eliezer's arrival. Rivkah added a bit of spice. She had learned Eliezer's identity based on the thanksgiving prayer she overheard him utter. Rivkah gathered that Eliezer was either Avraham's son or servant.

Two motives prompted her brother Lavan's ebullient overtures in greeting the distinguished visitors, family. One, avarice twinkled in his eyes as he beheld Rivkah's expensive gifts. Two, his affection for legendary Avraham's family moved him as he looked forward to meeting the patriarch's servant, let alone son.

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24. BT *Chullin* 95b
25. See *Shmuel* I 14
26. The Sages' (*Chullin* ibid.) statement that "Any sorcery that is not like that of Eliezer and Yehonatan is *not* sorcery" means that only one placing full faith in the devised indicator of how to act – as did Eliezer and Yehonatan – is transgressing. But the test would have to be illogical, unlike the tests described here.
27. *Mishneh Torah Hilchot Avodat Elilim* 11:4. *Raavad* ad loc forcefully attacks *Rambam*'s framing of the issue vis-à-vis Eliezer, but Abravanel asserts that the *Rambam* never meant what *Raavad* attributes to him. He does not elaborate.

Sprinting, Lavan arrived at the spring, locating the men. 'And he greeted: "Come and welcome by the Almighty's (Name). Why do you stand outdoors? Lodging awaits you as well as a place for the camels."' Lavan invoked the family's code of hospitality, insisting that kin do not stand on ceremony. Eliezer accepted the invitation 'and the man came inside the house.' The pronoun reference in the verse then shifts as logic dictates that Lavan attended to the animals as 'he unsaddled the camels, giving them straw and fodder' after 'he prepared water for him (Eliezer) and the men to clean up.'

After freshening up and seeing a set table, Eliezer focused on the journey's purpose. 'He said: "I cannot eat until I have spoken."' His host permitted this, 'saying to him: "Speak." And he said: "I am Avraham's servant."'

Old world manners precluded Eliezer from touching food without having secured his trip's objective. The ultimate slap would be if the sides did not consummate an engagement, which would result in Eliezer's sudden exit. He would not break bread with Rivkah's family of fakers.

Fascinating insights can be culled from the patriarch's servant's talk despite the seeming repetition of narrative. Especially noteworthy are the subtleties that distinguished what occurred from what wise and socially intelligent Eliezer actually revealed to his host family. The Sages[28] put it this way: "Better the table talk of the patriarch's servants than the Torah of their children." The servant's short discourse flowed masterfully.

Eliezer began by introducing himself as Avraham's chief attendant. This set the tone. He apprised his hosts that he was neither the son nor family of the esteemed man, but only staff. By implication the servant wanted them to garner a glimpse of Avraham's preeminence. If Betuel and Lavan were impressed with the distinguished-looking employee, they should imagine the overseer's prominence. 'Hashem has exceedingly and greatly blessed my master.' Eliezer detailed the diversified asset categories that ran the spectrum from herds and flocks to gold and silver.

Turning to describe Yitzchak, Eliezer painted a sensational birth. Tying a ribbon on the princely package, Eliezer added 'and he (Avraham) has given it all to him (Yitzchak).' Keeping to the facts, the servant laid it out. Yitzchak had it all. What woman would not jump at matrimony?

28. *Bereshit Rabbah* 60:8

Anticipating a glitch, Eliezer preempted a natural question. That is, if Yitzchak was so desirable and eligible a bachelor why did Eliezer travel hundreds of miles to find a wife? The servant answered. 'My master made me swear not to take a wife for my son among the Canaanite girls whom I dwell amongst.' Betuel learned of the very best Canaan had to offer – local dynastic heads and chiefdoms – who would certainly bid significantly for Yitzchak as a son-in-law.

Eliezer continued with Avraham's explicit instructions 'to go to my father's household and to my family. Take from there a wife for my son.'

Note ten liberties the wizened negotiator utilized:

- Avraham directed him to his birth district and homeland – nothing but a geographic marker. Eliezer fudged, mentioning Avraham's father's household and family as a way of confidence building.
- Avraham made mention of Hashem taking him away from Terach's household and promising him the Holy Land. Sensitively, Eliezer skipped that part out of concern that it implied Hashem rejected Aram in favor of Canaan.
- The patriarch emphasized that under no condition was Yitzchak to dwell in Aram. That, too, got skipped over.
- Eliezer deliberately edited out Hashem's compassion toward Avraham in bringing Rivkah to him. Invoking Divine kindness as a factor in procuring a spouse for Yitzchak would imply that Avraham's stature was insufficient for the purpose.
- Rivkah offered to draw water for his camels (because she could not know if they would actually drink) but in the retelling Eliezer told how she proposed to water them because they did in fact drink.
- Eliezer streamlined Rivkah's description of her lineage to avoid all nuance about Nachor's wives and precisely which of them she was from. No need to get into family dynamics and politics.
- While Rivkah volunteered her father's house as lodging, Eliezer omitted it out of concern that they would call her a jabberer who divulged information indiscreetly.

- Though Eliezer's asking about Rivkah's lineage followed gift-giving,[29] now he reversed the event's sequences.
- Eliezer at the spring invoked Hashem's attribute of kindness to Avraham by providing an excellent wife prospect. He elided that along the same lines as the fourth modification.
- Originally Eliezer praised Hashem for 'leading him to Avraham's family.' This Eliezer presently altered to emphasize the kindness of 'leading him to his master's family so he could seal a match.' Thus he insinuated that he had not come to pay a social visit. If the family balked, he would have no further business there and would depart pronto.

Interestingly, Eliezer praised the Almighty for having '*not removed* his truth and compassion from his master.' Straightforward thanks for being kind and truthful would not quite capture Eliezer's sentiments. He had some lingering doubts as to the advisability of Avraham establishing contact with his family after being told by Hashem to leave them behind.[30] The servant half-expected Hashem to throw a monkey wrench into the patriarch's plans, withholding compassion on consummating any such engagement. Eliezer was relieved to see that this proposal had the Almighty's approval.

Eliezer summed up his thoughtful words succinctly. 'And now if you will act kindly and fairly (*you won't get a better offer...*) toward my master, tell me. But if not, also tell me for I must take leave and go.' Damascus Eliezer's short but dignified speech hit the bull's-eye. To add leverage, he informed Betuel and Lavan that there were other good local families. He harbored no compunction to leave and find neighbors either to the left or right of Betuel's place.

The ball landed squarely in Betuel's court. 'And Lavan and Betuel answered saying, "The match is made in heaven [and out of our hands]. We cannot accept or reject your offer."' Lavan the son took the customary lead speaking position away from his father. Perhaps he was the smarter of the two. Alternatively, granting an elder the privilege of speaking last in grave matters indicated deference.[31]

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29. Abravanel emphasizes that this presumed sequence of events accords with *Rashi*'s interpretation. Earlier, the Abravanel was more inclined to accepting the *Ramban*'s opinion that the sequence was really as Eliezer described it here.
30. Chapter three, first *aliyah*.
31. Cf. BT *Sanhedrin* 32a

Betuel and Lavan accepted Eliezer's spring test as proof positive that Heaven nodded. This was the end of any input as far as they were concerned. 'Here is Rivkah. Take her and go. She will be your master's son's wife as Hashem ordained.' Upon hearing the father's consent and blessing, 'Avraham's servant prostrated himself to the Almighty.'

Fifth *aliyah*

'And the servant brought out silver and gold vessels and clothing, presenting them to Rivkah. He gave delicacies to her brother and mother.'

The bride received generous engagement gifts. Eliezer, the consummate guest, lavished Rivkah's brother and mother with exotic fruits from Israel and Damascus. It might have been a slight to bring something directly to Betuel, the head of the household. Additionally, Eliezer figured that Betuel would keep his word of honor and did not need to be bolstered with presents. That would also explain why the following verse omits Betuel's name. Rivkah's father was not the obstinate one. After a celebratory repast and nap, Eliezer woke up eager to wrap up the visit and head home.

Rivkah's brother and mother threatened to stall matters with their lame idea of keeping Rivkah home for a year or so. Perhaps that was their way of snubbing Eliezer's fruit basket gift. They held out for more moolah, especially after seeing Rivkah dripping with gold and silver. The Sages[32] read Betuel's silence differently. In their view, he simply could not talk – he was dead. He had planned to stonewall the deal and hence a *malach* snuffed out his soul.

Of course, Rivkah's scheming brother and mother did not come out directly for handouts. How crass. They couched Rivkah's delay in positive terms, explaining that a year's preparation would enable them to pamper and outfit the bride.[33] 'And her brother and mother said that the young lady should remain for a year or at least ten months before leaving.' Eliezer would not hear of it. 'And he told them: "Don't stall me. Hashem has wrought me success. Send me off so that I can go to my master."' Eliezer did not mince words. They heard his determination to bring Rivkah to Canaan now or scrap the

32. *Bereshit Rabbah* 60:12
33. Cf.*Esther* 2:12

entire arrangement. Under no circumstances was he about to piddle around in Aram. His executive obligations were required back home.

Rivkah's family had a fallback position. All eyes turned to center stage. What did Rivkah think? 'And they said: "Let us call the lass and ask her directly."' Likely, Rivkah did not need time to consider this match with Yitzchak. The question boiled down to the travel arrangements. Did she feel comfortable travelling with a stranger or would she prefer some family accompanying the retinue? If Rivkah chose the latter, proper journey preparations would need more time.

'They asked her if she would go with the man. She answered: "I will go."' Rivkah settled the matter, expressing comfort and confidence with Eliezer's escort and waived family accompaniment. Rivkah's undaunted willingness to depart resulted in her family's wounded egos as they interpreted it as a personal affront and rejection. Thus no family members volunteered companionship. The young lady was sent off with a bare minimum, lone nanny escort. Nonetheless, a meaningful parental blessing capped the departure. 'You, our sister...may you grow populous into myriads. And your descendants should inherit their enemies' gates.' The double benedictions included a prayer for prolificacy and prominence. Heaven likely put words into their mouths as they echoed the *malach*'s *akedah* sentiments expressed to Avraham.

Rivkah's enthusiasm kept the return trip preparation's pace moving briskly. 'And Rivkah got up, summoning her female attendants. (Together) they rode on camels, following the man. The servant took Rivkah and left.' Eliezer insisted that she ride alongside him as her protector.

Eliezer's caravan pulled up close to their final destination, home. 'And Yitzchak was returning from his Beer Lachai Roi travels for he resided in the southern lands.' Apparently he regularly went to Beer Lachai Roi to look after the flocks or other pressing business interests. The verse refers to Yitzchak's return from his financial affairs to his domicile in southern Canaan. Likely Beer Sheva, where his father had planted an *eshel*, was home. In earlier years, a house of prayer had been erected by Avraham near that *eshel*. Yitzchak headed towards the hallowed prayer spot. Evening hours arrived. Quiet dusk descended.

Tradition attributes the ancient custom of three daily Jewish prayer times to the patriarchs. Avraham is associated with the morning prayer, Yitzchak the afternoon and the evening prayer with Yaakov.[34] Very possibly, the specific

34. BT *Berachot* 26b

timing carried significance beyond teaching the importance of daily, communal *tefillah*. Recall that primitive societies worshipped the sun as their greatest of gods,[35] with the moon and stars serving as minor deities. The three patriarchs challenged those pagan beliefs in several ways. Among them was inculcating that true might rested with Hashem, Mover of the luminaries in their orbits. Prayer times were chosen to coincide with those moments when solar motion or susceptibility was most manifest. Avraham prayed when the sun rose over the horizon. Yitzchak conversed with Hashem when the fading sun softened its rays. Yaakov beseeched his Creator when the stars emerged, beating the sun back. The sun and stars' perennial battle for supremacy indicated that neither was truly divine. The universe's orderliness proclaims the existence of but one Manager.

Yitzchak's late afternoon jaunt had a more commonplace meaning, too. Sunset brought respite from the long, hot Middle Eastern days. Folks, shaking off a fading day's fatigue, fraternized in the fields.

Enjoying the last stubborn rays of light with his neighbors, Yitzchak noticed something in the distant, darkening horizon. 'And he looked up and saw. Camels approached.' It was too far away to make out Eliezer or for that matter anyone else. The young patriarch only saw a camel caravan's cloud. He walked closer. Rivkah spotted a man walking, unmistakably headed in their direction. She supposed a kind soul intended to offer night lodging.

The Torah writes that she dismounted her camel. Or perhaps out of modesty, Rivkah simply positioned her face so that the man could not see her. That prompted her question. 'She asked the servant: "Who is the man walking through the field towards us?" And the servant answered her: "It is my master." She veiled herself.'

Eliezer detailed the propitious trip for Yitzchak. The patriarch heard how the servant's efforts coincided with Divine Providence in bringing him the consummate partner. The Torah provides no explicit detail about their courtship. Yitzchak and Rivkah married, sharing intimacy in Sarah's former home.

Plausibly after the first matriarch passed away, her tent remained folded, unpitched. That changed. 'And Yitzchak brought her into his mother Sarah's tent. And he took Rivkah, marrying, and loving her. Concerning his mother, Yitzchak got solace.' The verses suggest the highest compliments for the young

35. See chapter three, first *aliyah*

princess. Her character, refinement, and beauty matched Sarah's radiance. She entered the tent formerly occupied by her illustrious mother-in-law, and made it her own.

Sixth *aliyah*

'And Avraham remarried, taking Keturah for a wife.'

Bizarre might aptly describe a reader's knee jerk reaction to the aged patriarch marrying so late in life. Moreover, he fathered six more children. What was Avraham thinking? Masculine competition and jealousy with newlywed Yitzchak must be ruled out. Way out of character, unconscionable. Maybe the Sages[36] also grappled with this problem and therefore softened the shock by asserting that Keturah was another name for Hagar. That is, Avraham did not go out and marry but rather brought back a former wife with whom he had fathered Yishmael. The rub: later in this narrative the Torah writes that Avraham had multiple concubines. Could that verse refer to Hagar/Keturah rolled up into one?

The following are six observations that credibly explain why Hashem may have inspired the ancient patriarch to marry:

- Hashem promised Avraham that he would be 'a prolific father of many nations.' This suggested that many different and varied children and nations would emerge from him. Avraham's marriage underscored a proactive effort to see Divine blessing's fruition.
- Avraham had been circumcised in his one hundredth year and was incredulous that a man his age could father children. After the *milah*, he was rejuvenated. Adherence to the commandments revives body and spirit.
- This marriage and its subsequent children deflated Yishmael's self-proclaimed boast that his status rivaled Yitzchak's. Yishmael would have a harder time asserting superiority over his six younger brothers. In other words, Avraham's new children would cork Yishmael's swanky talk. If anything, Keturah's spousal status looked stronger than Hagar's because it occurred after Sarah died whereas Hagar was a subsidiary servant. When these six sons received gifts before being sent away,

36. *Bereshit Rabbah* 61:4

Yishmael would reconcile himself to an indisputable and incontestable conclusion. Yitzchak was Avraham's sole and exclusive rightful heir.

- Hashem inspired Avraham's late marriage to highlight a general fact: one need not be overly choosy about a second wife. Consider for example how much was known about Sarah and her family. Much thought went into that marriage, let alone Yitzchak's marriage to Rivkah. Not so with Keturah. Nothing is written about her family or lineage. She probably was Canaanite, Philistine, or Egyptian.
- Love for Yitzchak. Fathering children by another wife (and concubines) would serve to prove that Avraham reserved his greatest affection for Yitzchak. Despite a natural tendency for parents to dote on the family's baby, Yitzchak was never uncrowned in his father's eyes. Avraham and Yitzchak's relationship ran deep; he was designated to walk in Hashem's ways. The Torah writes 'and Avraham gave everything to Yitzchak. Avraham's concubines' children were given gifts. Then he sent them away from Yitzchak his son while (the patriarch) still lived. He sent them to the Far East.' When Avraham passed away, no other son remained close by to challenge Yitzchak's status.
- The patriarch's psychological insight. Marrying other wives and having children softened the blow dealt to Yishmael. Instead of singling out Yishmael's secondary status, now others shared rejection's stinging pain. Avraham understood his oldest son's hurt. That could not be altered or helped. But the caring father did strive to reduce his jealousy and sibling rivalry with Yitzchak. Yishmael had shed his stigma. It did, in fact, allow the first two brothers to repair and mend former wounds. The Torah writes that upon Avraham's death 'Yitzchak and Yishmael his sons buried him in *me'arat haMachpelah*.' Keturah's tertiary sons did not even merit that. The brotherly bond of the elder pair brought further blessing to Avraham's final years.

The Torah does not record Avraham's death in its proper chronological position. 'And these were (the number of) Avraham's years that he had lived – one hundred and seventy-five years.' Avraham actually lived to see Yitzchak's twins, though the verses do not make it appear that way. Occasionally the storyline dictates swapping things around. In a literary manner of speaking, it reads cleaner to finish up with Avraham's story before proceeding to Yitzchak's.

These verses describing the patriarch's death illuminate much about Jewish perceptions of life. The Torah employs three distinct verbs describing more than those days leading up to his passing. 'And Avraham expired, passing away at a ripe age. He was old and content when he was gathered to his forefathers.' How many death synonyms in a single verse! Formal translations refer to his passing or dying, expiring, and being gathered to his people. Why such macabre verbosity? Is Judaism obsessed with death? Comparable death word choices are found regarding the other forefathers[37] and Aharon.[38] Verses describing Moshe's death[39] omit "expiration" to reflect his unique status as will be explained.

It does not seem plausible that these various verbs are synonymous. If the use of all the words is somehow meant to convey the holiness of the departed, why was Yishmael given this same special honor?[40] Even granting tradition that he repented before his death[41] he certainly never attained patriarchal piety. Just as problematic is Moshe's verse utilizing only two verbs because he was unquestionably the greatest of all *Tanach* personalities.

To answer this question, our discussion turns to a reflection on man's dual nature: his physicality and cognition versus his rational soul. Death covers man's three elements of vitality. Bodily vital function failure is *expiration*. The second predicate *die* describes an end of the physical and spiritual composite whole. Finally, *passing* or *ingathering* marks a soul's departure to its destination.

Consider that a physiological end of life episode is defined as a shut-down of various systems (respiratory, digestive systems etc.). True that a soul escapes immediately thereafter, but the emphasis at this first stage concentrates on the physical symptoms of impending soul departure, especially when death occurs at old age and physiological function naturally grinds to a halt. A soul's departure from the expended body corresponds to *death*, stage-two. *Ingathering* or stage three alludes to a soul's final resting place or heavenly niche. Tradition groups all three patriarchs as sharing their eternal abode with Aharon and other righteous individuals. And Yishmael? He indeed died old

37. Chapter eight, sixth *aliyah* (Yitzchak); Chapter twelve, sixth *aliyah* (Yaakov)
38. *Bamidbar* 20:24,28–29
39. *Devarim* 32:50
40. Seventh *aliyah* below
41. BT *Bava Batra* 16b

naturally. In addition, his soul was gathered unto his forefathers – his Egyptian family and other co-religionists who shared his values and had comparable life achievements.

Moshe's final verse has two verbs (dying and ingathering) but not the initial one (expiration). Why is no reference made to the initial stage of his physical deterioration? The Torah taught that his body never experienced physiological fatigue.[42] Moshe's cause of death was Divine decree alone.[43]

Concluding this topic, note that earlier Torah personalities' deaths are recorded with a single predicate (the general second one)[44] because the Torah does not particularly focus on these personae.

'And after Avraham's death the Almighty blessed Yitzchak his son. Yitzchak dwelled in Beer Lachai Roi.' Breaking with custom Avraham apparently did not want to bless Yitzchak before dying. This is discussed in the next *parashah*.[45] But Hashem did bless the second patriarch to convey that he alone was heir to Avraham's heavenly blessings.[46]

Seventh *aliyah*

'And these are Yishmael, son of Avraham's, descendants. Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, gave birth (to him) from Avraham.'

Before proceeding to Yitzchak's life story, Yishmael's life and death are dispensed with and chronicled in fantastic shorthand. Details, let alone narratives concerning his children and family do not get recorded. He died of natural causes at the age of one hundred and thirty-seven after having sired twelve chieftains. They took residence in wide land swathes corresponding to Egypt, Arabia and other parts of the Near East.

42. *Devarim* 34:7
43. See Abravanel to *Melachim* II 2 for a further discussion of Moshe's death.
44. See chapter one, sixth and seventh *aliyot*
45. Chapter six, fifth *aliyah*
46. More particulars about Yitzchak's heavenly benedictions also come up in chapter six.

CHAPTER SIX

PARASHAT TOLDOT

COLOR WAR

First *aliyah*

'And these are the life events of Yitzchak, son of Avraham. Avraham was Yitzchak's father.'

Parashat Chayei Sarah concluded with Keturah and Yishmael's lineage. For style consistency *Toldot* continues this theme and opens with Yitzchak's progeny. The multi-nuanced word "*toldot*" denotes offspring as well as major life events. In introducing this *parashah*, a double entendre captures both meanings.

The second half of the verse 'Avraham was Yitzchak's father' seems superfluous, but it isn't. The fourteen similarities listed below show to what extent these two patriarchs' lives overlap:

- Both married women from within their extended families.
- Both got married at forty.[1]
- The two couples were initially barren.
- Disappointing and cavalier firstborn sons preceded their righteous brothers.
- Yishmael and Esav excelled in cunning and hunting. In contrast, their younger sons Yitzchak and Yaakov's lives stressed spiritual pursuits and pious presence of mind.
- Both fathers loved their firstborns despite their glaring character flaws.

1. See chapter two, seventh *aliyah*

- Divine intervention orchestrated the firstborns' rejection as worthy successors and rightful heirs.
- Sole and exclusive inheritance skipped to the second born.
- Avraham and Yitzchak lived through devastating famine.
- Both fled to the same destination: Gerar.
- Gerar's King Avimelech and army brass sought them both out in order to elicit promises of non-belligerence and form alliances.
- Each subjected their wives to playing along with a sister ruse in the face of lascivious Philistine society. Both had been chastised by Avimelech for so doing.
- Both accumulated fabulous wealth.
- Avraham and Yitzchak searched and drilled untapped fresh water sources.

This list illustrates how the two men shared many character-building experiences. Avraham had pioneered and anticipated crucial vicissitudes. He mentored and refined Yitzchak.

Considering that Yitzchak's life and times are covered in only one *parashah,* readers learn about his greatness by deduction. For example, he married at forty despite tradition pegging a significantly younger marriage age as ideal.[2] Likely, Avraham and Sarah entertained mixed feelings about Yitzchak's delay. Naturally, they dreamed about becoming grandparents. Rationally they understood Yitzchak's priorities that stressed personal growth before the *chuppah*. Virtue, of course, needs nurturing. Until forty, Yitzchak devoted his energy to mastering timeless, Torah morals.

Apropos *Pirkei Avot*'s prescription of eighteen as the ideal marriageable age, this is not necessarily definitive. It means that manhood has been reached and one is physically capable of fathering children. In *Tanach*, Shimshon[3] and Shlomoh's[4] married life imbroglios send sobering warning signals to those embarking on marriage before attaining sufficient personal growth. The Sages[5] stress the importance of employment and security before matrimony.

2. *Mishnah Avot* 5:25
3. See *Shoftim* 13 through 16
4. See *Melachim* I 11:1–10
5. BT *Sotah* 44a

They also inform us[6] that Esav emulated his father vis-à-vis his nuptial age[7] in feigned rectitude.

'And Yitzchak son of Avraham was forty when he married Aramean Betuel's daughter Rivkah from Padan Aram. She was Lavan's sister.' By inference, readers learn that Yitzchak did not put off marriage because he could not find the right Canaanite woman. Rather, he insisted on a wife with a shared family background. The last *parashah* illustrated providence in tracking Yitzchak's *bascherte*. Additional aspects develop in the next *parashah* when Rivkah's brother Lavan provided safe-haven for the fugitive Yaakov. Moreover, Yaakov eventually married Lavan's daughters. Indeed, Divine prescience guided Eliezer's steps to Aram Naharaim.

Twenty years of childless marriage painfully challenged and frustrated the couple. Yitzchak determined that Rivkah alone was the infertile spouse because Hashem had promised Avraham that 'your seed goes through Yitzchak.' The verses after Avraham and Sarah received their new names were most explicit. 'Your wife Sarah will have your son and you shall call him Yitzchak. I [Hashem] will establish My Covenant with him forever and with his descendants.'[8] Yitzchak's post-*akedah* burnt-offering status strongly suggested that he did not bear sterility's blemish. This crystallized his conclusion that he could father children. Against this backdrop, Yitzchak prayed on Rivkah's behalf, hoping that his children would come from her and not another wife.

Although Yitzchak assumed the fertility problems were Rivkah's, the reality was different. 'The Almighty heard *him*.' Implied here is that both bore reproductive deficiencies but Heaven heeded his prayer to break infertility's impasse. Perhaps Yitzchak had inherited his parents' genetic makeup. Tradition asserts that both of Yitzchak's parents, barring Divine intervention, would have remained childless.[9] 'His wife Rivkah conceived.' That is, Heaven granted them both the ability to conceive. Yitzchak's fervent *kavanah* goaded Heaven's intercession and blessings.

'And the embryos intensely struggled from within her.' Ensconced within their mother's womb, Esav's reddish constitution inclined him to fiery impulsivity, while Yaakov's fair complexion alluded to a calm and reasoned

6. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:1
7. Fifth *aliyah* below
8. Chapter three, seventh *aliyah*
9. See BT *Yevamot* 64a-b

disposition. Divine destiny instilled an unnatural polar contrast between these twins that foreshadowed more than color war. Much more.

'She asked: "Why me?"' Prophetically, Yitzchak had previously informed Rivkah that the Almighty had acceded to their joint prayers. They had both merited a Divine override of their shared shortcomings. Rivkah reasoned that they should both be experiencing the acute effects of a biological transformation, and the baby's agitation was a byproduct of her own. But why was she suffering while Yitzchak was as hale as ever? Plausibly, she had no way to determine whether she was carrying multiple embryos. Even if she somehow figured out that she carried twins, she could not have known why they jostled incessantly.

'She went to consult (a man of) Hashem.' Providence – so prominent with her husband's family – lent guidance and direction. A man of Hashem would help Rivkah understand the bigger picture. The Sages[10] identify this anonymous *tzaddik* as Shem. However, given that Avraham was still alive, she likely turned to him.

A perspicacious message foretold matters, but provided no solutions. Rivkah learned that she was pregnant with an unnatural set of twins but the import was to span millennia. The dueling duo heralded history. They would beget two non-brotherly nations locked in incessant battles for supremacy. The prophet elaborated on the boys' completely different temperaments and characters – the future progenitors of varied nations and peoples. Looming ominously appeared the specter of frequent internecine fighting and a fickle victor's wreath. Inconclusive, sporadic infighting would persist.

The oracle delineated four underlying causes for this fetal friction. First, she heard that despite being born to upright parents, piety did not necessarily get passed down. In fact, they received opposite temperaments. It was as if one child came from the North Pole, the second from the South Pole. 'You carry two nations' – a clash of civilizations.

Second, neither child inherited Yitzchak or Avraham's genetic deficiency that had resulted in their infertility. Rather both would exhibit prolificacy and spawn populous nations. 'Two (distinct) peoples will branch out of your womb.' While the first description emphasized quality, the second one highlighted quantity. "This womb is not big enough for the two of us" rang out as

10. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:6

the opening bell to protracted punching. Two wrestling titans would generate into headlocked, prolific peoples inhabiting a world straining to accommodate their sheer immensity. To this day, continents shudder when unconfined and nonconventional fighting mocks borders, and scoffs at global stability.

Third, conflict and tension define their non-brotherly relationship. Nasty snipes, pitched battles, and full-scale wars would endure, not for decades, nor even for centuries. Infighting for dominance gets measured in millennia. "Eternal struggle," to quote Rivkah's pundit.

Fourth, the inversion of nature's order would persistently refill fraternal enmity's powder keg. Normally, a younger sibling is domicile or subservient. In this rewrite, the younger leads the elder. The struggle for settling perceived wrongs, in a manner of speaking, would stir the cauldron. Compromise is always remote because one crown cannot be shared. Too much is vested to consider a *détente*. Yishmael and Keturah's descendants, relegated to secondary status in Avraham's lifetime, never seriously contended for top position. Not so with Esav. Walking away from his perceived alpha standing would be, so to speak, over his dead body. Eternal envy would greedily eat at equals' equanimity.

History bears witness that while Yaakov's Providence provides an upper hand, Esav's shifty resourcefulness finds ways to neutralize that advantage. Yaakov's slightest misstep mobilizes Esav. Indeed, using the formula that according to tradition Yaakov is the paradigm for *bnei* Yisrael and Esav/Edom is the patriarch of Christianity, things appear this way. The seemingly smallish Jewish slipup carries grave consequences. Edom's snares are deadly. Understand, of course, that "slipup" in this context alludes to a moral lapse. Esav's whip is always readied to snap, break his brother's back. Cheating biology carries a steep price. The last two thousand years of Jewish annals are replete with bitter, incessant internecine warring.

An epic battle has been pitched, ferocious, devastating, awesome, and ongoing. In *Tanach* times and afterwards, this clash of two civilizations ebbed and flowed.[11] Edom was the first to set up sovereigns, but when King David's reign got underway, the convincing and smashing victory went to the Jews.[12] Later, King Yehoram fell under idolatry's lure and Edom slipped

11. Cf. BT *Megillah* 6a
12. See *Shmuel* II 8:14

out of Israel's grip. Jews then reestablished an autonomous monarchy. The last period of Jewish suzerainty under Hyrcanus and Agrippa convincingly tamed Edom. Shortly thereafter, Esav nearly decimated the entire Chosen People. Millennia of Jewish exile following the Second Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. harrowingly attest to Christian and other anti-Semitic legislation, brutality, and holocausts.

'The elder – the younger will serve.' The ambiguous phrasing by Rivkah's seer alluded to posterity's pendulum. Is it 'the elder will serve the younger', or 'the elder, the younger will serve'? One constant throughout the ages is that the key rests in Jewish hands. Adherence to Torah precepts and traits assures survival and victory. A lapse brings the nation to the abyss's depths.

'She carried to full-term and it turned out that twins (had been) in her womb.' Rivkah's first, multiple fetus pregnancy was in danger of being cut short, but Heaven decreed carrying to full term. Due to the completed nine-month period, both embryos fully developed their respective emotional and physical makeups. That prophecy's first prediction had been validated.

The peculiar spelling of 'twins' (*tomim*) begs interpretation. It suggests that each child had been wholly created according to his respective nature. One's chiseled features painted absolute righteousness, the other palette portrayed perfect evil. The Sages[13] contrast the Torah's spelling of the word "twins" in Yehudah and Tamar's case (*te'omim*),[14] explaining that a pair of pious twins merits a full spelling, whereas Yitzchak and Rivkah had no such fortune.

'The first one came out reddish, hairy. They called his name Esav.' Scant detail describes the babies. Ruddiness and hairiness captured Esav's two physical attributes. His looks boded terror on account of his combined features that bespoke murderous rage. Esav's name implies a physical maturity apt for a toddler, if not an older child or young adult.

'And afterwards his brother came out and his hand grabbed Esav's heel. And he named him Yaakov. Yitzchak was sixty when they were born.' In stark contrast to Esav, newborn Yaakov's appearance was entirely unremarkable. Placid equilibrium indicated profound emotional balance. Pensive Yaakov was not given to passionate impulsivity.

13. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:8
14. See chapter nine, fourth *aliyah*

Heel clenching was the sole adjective in Yaakov's otherwise nondescript birth. Given fraternal twins' separate sacs, how did Yaakov manage that? It appears that both sacs ruptured before the birth as they headed towards the birth canal. Esav won with Yaakov trailing behind.

The following are five complementary explanations for this queer pose:

- Yaakov attempted to exit first because his conception, according to the Sages'[15] tradition, preceded Esav's. His birth rush conveyed his hot firstborn pursuit. Grabbing his brother's foot may have slowed him but failed to alter the delivery order.
- Yaakov and Esav's connectedness set a scene for their lifelong interlock; he could not shake free.
- Yaakov's hold on his brother's heel highlighted their contradictory value systems. Yaakov cherished the spirituality that Esav irreverently trampled upon. Epicureanism delighted Esav. Also note that in contrast to Esav's three letter proper name,[16] Yaakov's had an extra letter[17] tacked on.[18] The extra letter is one of Hashem's Name's letters, suggesting the third patriarch's piety.
- Yaakov's precarious position under Esav's foot foreshadows Edom's dominance. Has he not trampled upon Israel throughout millennia?
- Yaakov's stubborn determination will supplant Esav when the latter reaches the tail end of his day in the sun. Jewish buoyancy supported by Divine Providence is ultimately undefeatable. Prophets like Ovadyah[19] and Daniyel[20] predicted *Melech haMashiach* ushering in the fifth and final world superpower. Edom's fourth sovereignty will get swept aside forever.

§§§

Never has a rivalry been as pronounced and heralded as Esav and Yaakov's. *Tanach* readers grasp this blood feud's magnitude. Adversarial positioning has borne the greatest consequences. Why did the Divine plan call for twins

15. *Bereshit Rabbah* 63:8
16. עשו
17. יו"ד
18. עקב
19. *Ovadyah* 1:18,21
20. See *Daniyel* 2

with different natures? Could Rivkah not have had two pregnancies? Three explanations offer important insights.

First, while children generally take after their parents' characteristics, occasionally personality likenesses skip generations and a child resembles their grandparents. In Yitzchak and Rivkah's case, a yawning disparity marked Avraham and Betuel's essences. The first patriarch began his religious quest at a relatively early age and made the pursuit of Hashem's ways his life's work. He mastered belief and trust in Hashem. A study in contrasts, idolatrous Betuel (and Lavan) preyed on deceit and subterfuge for their daily bread. Practicing cunning, they lived as a human trapper and hunter. Betuel terrorized by stealth, leaving neither trace nor trail.

Ethical eugenics, in a manner of speaking, played a part in the boys' disparate chemistry. Hashem opted not to blend gene pools and create mediocrity. Divine plans engineer for maximal, virtuous potential. Rivkah's double conception provided precision as it isolated Avraham and Betuel's moral DNA, creating distinct embryos, polarized twins. Perhaps the *parashah's* opening verses alluded to this: 'Avraham was Yitzchak's father and Yitzchak was forty when he married Betuel's daughter Rivkah from Padan Aram. She was Lavan's sister.' Yaakov inherited from Avraham; Esav from Betuel and Lavan. Interestingly, once Yaakov had been created in Avraham's image, he had been genetically inoculated from Aramean influence. This explains why even his marriage to Lavan's daughters[21] had no negative bearing on the twelve tribes.[22]

The second reason modeled nature's pattern. Metaphorically, the three respective patriarchs, like the stomach, liver and capillaries all participated in a vital refinement process. Hashem forged a nation for destiny. Avraham, as progenitor, was charged with the task of purifying raw intake. Producing Yitzchak effectively pushed aside Yishmael and Keturah's children. Yitzchak distilled further – Yaakov filtered out Esav. The third forefather distributed beneficial spiritual nutrients amongst his children based on their respective qualities and needs. Earlier inchoate components morally evolved because three generations fine-stroked and finessed timeless Torah values. The

21. See chapter seven, third *aliyah*

22. An intriguing question arises. Recall from chapter five (second *aliyah*) that Avraham insisted on Yitzchak avoiding Canaanite girls due to their hard-wired character flaws, as opposed to Aram's tendency toward paganism which is not genetically encoded. Here it appears that there were deep-seated ethical kinks in Avraham's family as well that needed to be isolated.

Almighty's meticulous plan for a Chosen People's moral development had been realized.

Lastly, Divine Providence arranged for Yaakov to have a ready and worthy adversary. Esav provided Yaakov with constant reminders to keep Avraham and Yitzchak's ways. Stickler and overzealous Esav observed Yaakov's every step, prepared to pounce should Yaakov step out of line. Perhaps the Yaakov/Esav's dyad suggests that personal growth requires tension, fear and dynamism. As a corollary, Edom's constant, baseless hatred would keep that enemy out of *Eretz Yisrael's* borders when Jews had any say in the matter. Evil Esav is best kept at arm's length. To be sure, this is an extremely profound and intricate scheme. The full ramifications of Heaven's directive operate well beyond man's grasp.

§§§

'And Yitzchak was sixty when they were born.' This observation precludes Yitzchak contributing to Esav's livid nature. At sixty a man is no longer beset with the red hot passions of youth. Still, Esav emerged flushed.

'As the young men grew up, Esav became adept at hunting. He was an outdoorsman. And Yaakov turned introspective, sitting in academies.' The prophet's words proved accurate again. An unrivaled hunter, Esav excelled. He possessed uncanny intuition and skill. His sharp, focused eye for detail and observation tracked animals' habits and instincts. Esav outfoxed his prey. The chase brought out his finest and happiest moments, especially on lone excursions.

Bookish Yaakov, in stark contrast, thirsted after understanding and knowledge. Unlike shadowy Esav, plain-thinking Yaakov gravitated towards expositors and academies of higher education. He never tired of visiting his grandfather Avraham. At about the same age, hadn't Avraham sat enthralled at Noach's early man stories? Other commentators[23] posit that this verse describing Yaakov may have referred to shepherding. Perhaps Yitzchak apprenticed Yaakov in his and Avraham's profession.

'And Yitzchak loved Esav because he told tales of daring hunts. Rivkah loved Yaakov.' Yitzchak loved brave Esav, evidently unaware of Rivkah's revelation that 'the elder will serve the younger.' He delighted in Esav's storied

23. *Ibn Ezra*

outings and adventures, believing he would inherit as a firstborn. Rivkah's love and preference for Yaakov melded with Heaven's plan. Note, these verses do not suggest that Yitzchak detested Yaakov or Rivkah harbored ill-feeling towards Esav. The Torah means that Yitzchak understood that Esav would become the family's main progeny, Yaakov the secondary. Privy to information she apparently kept to herself, Rivkah knew differently.

'And Yaakov prepared food when Esav returned from the field, utterly spent.' First born competition came to a head unexpectedly. Either for himself or his parents, Yaakov had been cooking a lentil dish when ravenous Esav returned empty from a hunt. An excursion left him exhausted and hungry. He demanded the pot's contents so he could devour it in a gulp.

'And Esav said to Yaakov: "Feed me the *adom* (red stuff) now because I am on empty. On account of that he called it "*edom*."' Esav had neither the strength nor patience to examine the food carefully. Thoughtlessly, he called the pot's contents *adom* because of the stew's reddishness. While it is true that Esav is associated with Edom throughout *Tanach*, it has nothing to do with this episode. Esav's nickname stuck because of his crimson complexion.

'And Yaakov said: "Sell me your firstborn status just like today."' Yaakov, of course, saw that famished Esav only wanted to shovel and scarf down everything. Yaakov insisted on a making a deal: the lentils for the birthright.

What was Yaakov thinking? Did the firstborn's double inheritance motivate the initiative? Failing to hold off Esav's birth delivery, was Yaakov taking a second stab? These questions assume a greater proportion considering that Yitzchak had amassed substantial holdings. There was plenty of wealth to go around, assuring both men of sizeable inheritances. Besides, the cheap pursuit of honor and status contradicts Yaakov's spirituality. Later, the Torah relates how Yaakov repeatedly addressed Esav subserviently, calling him "my lord." Communications to Esav concluded obsequiously "from your servant, Yaakov."[24]

Another issue dwarfs all others: What kind of person finagles his self-aggrandizement when a brother is down? The patriarch aimed for two things. One, cognizant of Hashem's promise to Avraham at the *brit milah* covenant, he wanted it. Namely, Yaakov sought closeness to Hashem based upon Divine Providence. Two, he desired Holy Land exclusivity. Yaakov knew of its mystique and potential to bolster individual and national idealism. In fact, both

24. See chapter eight, second through fourth *aliyot*

are flip sides of one coin. The two components of Avraham's essential legacy are interlinked: occupying Canaan while keeping Hashem's Torah maximizes Divine closeness. Israel is for spiritual seekers. This birthright, bequeathed through Yitzchak to his descendants, was precisely what Yaakov intended to purchase from Esav.

Could Yitzchak's legacy be shared by two? Yaakov did not think so. The men's personalities, belief systems and goals precluded a partnership. Yaakov lived a life of faith; Esav scorned it. Brothers they were, but only nominally. Mutual accommodation hardly seemed likely let alone desirable. Yaakov concluded that, by right, Israel and concomitant Divine Providence must be his alone.

Yaakov's discipline and dedication earned him easement to the laddered land. All of this got Yaakov thinking: will Israel's potential and spiritual bounty get squandered on undeserving Esav due to his being born first? The travesty rankled him. Yaakov deliberated: will this pretender plunder the pure palace? Pangs of injustice plagued Yaakov and thus he pledged not to sit idly. He considered solutions, fully confident that Esav would not mind losing Canaan, an otherworldly bonanza. Yaakov also wondered if the Divine Plan might skip horizontally to Yishmael or Keturah's children. Yaakov was therefore resolute. He would buy the birthright privilege from Esav. He had not been born holding on to Esav's heel for nothing. Patiently, Yaakov waited, confident that Hashem would provide succor.

Another incongruity piqued Yaakov. Responsible firstborns had rights as well as obligations. Incumbent upon the family's eldest was to step into his father's shoes. He must provide for his family's needs in case dad was away, sick, weak, or incapacitated. Someone needed to attend the day to day concerns. Elder Esav should have been that someone. It did not happen because of his other distractions. Outdoor excursions, hunting trips, building and laying snares, checking and resetting traps occupied his time, energy, and creativity.

By default and de facto, Yaakov shouldered a weighty burden alone. This, then, was the backdrop when lollygagging Esav returned home after who-knows-how-long on the road. Yaakov, toiling in the kitchen, watched his deadbeat brother stumble in. Esav's inaudible grunting for grub was the last straw. Yaakov was tired of kowtowing. Sick of covering for this charlatan, he demanded remedy.

Yaakov snapped. When he proposed the lentils for the birthright, he meant in so many words: "*Esav, let's get this straight. You're not here very often and you don't want to be here. I'm holding down the fort, doing my part and yours. I'm not complaining. It's just time for a reality check. Let's fix things. I propose that you sell me the birthright once and for all, so you can pursue your interests. Just like today, I'll be doing the cooking and I'll run the household.*"

Esav did not like his little brother telling him that the party, per se, was over. However, Yaakov's logic had been compelling, and his timing was perfect. Esav relented as a deal was struck. A pot of lentils for Esav's birthright.

'And Esav said: "I am mortal. What good is being firstborn?"' Esav would no longer have to maintain the charade of a dutiful son, forced to a homestead's tedious routine. Adventuresome Esav reasoned that he would not miss it a whit. Belittlingly, he figured that Yaakov, essentially, had no life. Why sit at home with their father and grandfather? For Esav, ancient teachings were just an irrelevant drag. The hearty stew spoke his language, stoked his fire. His father's estate? Esav figured he would probably get mauled by some wild animal before his father's passing. The deal flushed out many truths, including Esav's denial of the afterlife. On the other hand, Yaakov garnered sole proprietorship of Avraham and Yitzchak's legacy. He embraced all of its privileges and obligations.

'Yaakov said: "Swear to me that you will stick by what you say today." And he swore to him. And he sold his firstborn rights to Yaakov.' Was the lentils-for-legacy transaction within the bounds of a fair and valuable consideration? In light of a later reference,[25] it is plausible that Yaakov ultimately transferred his full share in Yitzchak's wealth to Esav. The lentils may have served as earnest money or a down payment. This would corroborate Yaakov's empty handed arrival at Lavan's home.[26]

Esav *fressed*, guzzled, and sauntered out, manifestly showing that the family's birthright meant beans to him. Both youths were fifteen when they executed the agreement. If Esav ever felt cheated, it never came up. That is, until the deal had some fifty years to age and grow stale.[27]

Thus far the birthright sale analysis sale centered on Yaakov's zeal to take possession of Avraham and Yitzchak's spiritual legacy and deed to the

25. 'With a shepherd's rod I traversed the Yarden.' (Chapter eight, first *aliyah*)
26. See chapter seven, second *aliyah*
27. See the sixth *aliyah* below: 'First he took my birthright…'

Holy Land. However, another motive existed. It has been suggested[28] that Yaakov's lentil dish, a traditional mourner's meal, marked Avraham's death.[29] He made the meal when his righteous grandfather passed away in order to comfort Yitzchak. Esav was not around his *sabba*'s bed when he passed away. He probably fidgeted at the funeral, anxious to get a cumbersome affair over with. Certainly he shed no tears over greybeard grandpa.

Adding insult to injury, Esav demanded his father's meal poured down his gullet. Yaakov quaked with rage at the thought of his parents' and grandparents' holy legacy landing in a voracious brute's hands. He offered Esav a chance to break bonds with his burdensome family, and the elder son eagerly jumped at the offer.

§§§

'And there was a famine in the land other than the first one in Avraham's time.' According to tradition, immediately after Avraham passed away a bitter famine befell Israel. This had been the first famine since Avraham's arrival in Canaan, forcing an Egyptian sojourn. Clearly Providence had protected the first patriarch, sustaining his family with a century of plenty. Seeking means of support, 'Yitzchak travelled to King Avimelech in Gerar.' Yitzchak may have chosen this venue because the two had previously been friends, or perhaps the king was the same one from Avraham's time.

As Yitzchak entered Gerar, a prophecy warned him against continuing his journey set on Egypt. 'And Hashem appeared to Yitzchak saying: "Do not travel further to Egypt. Dwell in the land (of Canaan) that I will (later) instruct you."' This is in contrast to Avraham's Egyptian visit. As stated before,[30] tradition suggests that the *akedah* imbued Yitzchak with sacrificial status. As such, leaving for Mitzrayim could not be sanctioned.

The best place for Yitzchak was Canaan. But in light of the current famine, he was given license to temporarily pitch his tent in Gerar. Hashem would bless him and protect him from the famine and hostile locals. The reason for permitting Gerar and banning Egypt was 'For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands as per the oath I swore to Avraham.' Pelishtim was also the promised land.

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28. Ran
29. See BT *Bava Batra* 16b
30. See chapter four, seventh *aliyah*

Likely, Yitzchak wondered about ruling an entire country with no means of populating it. Hashem set his mind at ease promising that He would greatly multiply his Jewish descendants like heaven's stars. Additionally, the prophecy implicitly provided him with clear-cut security assurances. Israel is the exclusive domain of Yitzchak's descendants. The indigenous peoples of Canaan need not feel threatened by future Jewish hegemony. Hashem blessed the land abundantly, for many to enjoy and flourish.

These promises were not a reward for staying in Gerar or to sweeten staying out of verdant Egypt. Yitzchak was blessed because 'Avraham heeded My voice. He kept My watch, commandments, statutes, and teachings.' The first patriarch's dedication had, indeed, been comprehensive. Note that each particular aspect of the patriarch's obeisance in the verse cited refers to a major event:

- 'Heeding Hashem's voice' recalled leaving Charan.[31]
- 'Hashem's watch' conveyed Avraham's sense of propriety. Specifically it became manifest when he refused King Sedom's spoils offer.[32] Alternatively, it indicated Avraham's spreading of monotheism.
- 'Commandments' acknowledged the patriarch's *brit milah*[33] and exiling of Yishmael.[34]
- The entire *akedah* episode epitomized the performance of 'statutes' or Hashem's will when human rationale fails.
- Finally, he internalized Hashem's 'teachings' by sending Eliezer to Padan Aram in search of Yitzchak's wife.[35] This included exiling his concubines' children.[36]

Second *aliyah*

'And Yitzchak dwelled in Gerar.'

Comforted by the Divine commandment to remain in Israel, Yitzchak and his family settled in their Azah home. The neighbors soon found Rivkah's riveting

31. Chapter three, first *aliyah*
32. Fifth *aliyah*, ibid.
33. Seventh *aliyah*, ibid.
34. Chapter four, fifth *aliyah*
35. Chapter five, second *aliyah*
36. Sixth *aliyah*, ibid.

looks distracting. Gerar's trauma associated with Avraham and Sarah's stay probably jarred their collective memories. Instead of outright wife-snatching, they resorted to milder overtures. 'And the locals asked concerning his wife. He said that she was his sister. Fear dictated saying that she was his sister. (He reasoned) the locals' interest on account of Rivkah's beauty would get him killed.' Their unceremonious prying worried Yitzchak and Rivkah. Even the fact that Rivkah had teenage boys did not deter the love-crazed. Infatuated Gerarites dismissed the details, rationalizing that the kids were from a different mother.

Tersely, Yitzchak asserted that Rivkah was his sister, purposefully sidestepping the loaded questions. Given the dire repercussions, the patriarch justified the sister ruse, especially considering their actual bloodline family ties. Siblings travelling together aroused no curiosity. Furthermore, Yitzchak knew that if things got too out of hand, he would appear before King Avimelech to straighten matters. For some time, this delicately settled the matter and no attempts to steal the matriarch were made.

But secrets cannot be kept forever. As Gerar's sojourn extended into months and perhaps longer, the truth escaped. Intentional or not, the king had witnessed the couple's spousal exchanges and understood the relationship's real nature. 'He saw Yitzchak sporting with Rivkah, his wife.' The king railed. Summoning Yitzchak, he demanded an explanation for their bantering. Clearly the king saw something too suggestive for siblings. Avimelech raged. 'He said: "The woman is most certainly your wife. Why did you say that she was your sister?"'

Yitzchak explained the entire story which the king accepted. Harboring no ill feelings, King Avimelech appreciated Yitzchak's candor. He treated the couple as personal friends. More than that: he considered them his charges, extending them protection and honor. This episode could have unwound much differently for Yitzchak. Avimelech's handling of the affair should be viewed as the fulfillment of Divine promise. That is, despite Yitzchak's inadvertent and unintentional run-in with the king, Heaven's first promise 'I will be with you' saved him.

'And Yitzchak planted the land. That year yielded one hundred fold as Hashem had blessed him.' When Yitzchak's fields yielded bumper crops it was attributed to the second part of Hashem's blessing. Despite sections of

Israel experiencing drought, the patriarch's patch flowered. Yitzchak knew that this abundance had been too plentiful to ascribe to natural productivity; supernatural causes wrought it.

The Sages[37] question why Yitzchak measured his produce, a practice associated with obviating or retarding Divine blessing. They explain that Yitzchak earmarked a portion for charity, consistent with the Torah attesting to this practice by Avraham and Yaakov. A more straightforward explanation takes into account that only via an accurate crop measurement could Yitzchak fathom the depth of the Almighty's affection.

Third *aliyah*

'And the man grew (prominent). His successes bounded by leaps until he had become very wealthy, formidable indeed.'

Until now, the Torah stressed Yitzchak's attainment in terms of farming output. Wealth, though, is not everything. It should not be entertained that field work detracted from his prestige. True his father Avraham had not tilled land, still 'he (Yitzchak) grew prominent…formidable indeed.' Similarly it would be a mistake to assume that Yitzchak quit shepherding. He hadn't. Without a doubt and thanks to Hashem's promise, Yitzchak witnessed wealth growth due to his agricultural successes. Together with the flocks inherited from his father, Yitzchak's fortunes skyrocketed. 'And he amassed flocks, cattle and servants. The Pelishtim envied him.'

Despite the Torah's manifest recording of heaven's material blessing, one aspect had yet to be fulfilled. Hashem promised Yitzchak and his descendants control over the land. The upcoming episode with the water wells completed this prediction. Rediscovering the springs that his father had toiled to purchase, use, and maintain – followed by Gerarite groveling for peace accords – carried indisputable proof that the patriarch was, in fact, boss.

The Pelishtim anticipated Yitzchak's assertions of ownership. They destroyed the fresh water sources, adopting scorched earth policies. 'And all of the wells that his father's servants had dug during Avraham's time had been buried by the Pelishtim. They landfilled them.' Sabotage was meant to dry Yitzchak out and compel him to quit his local monopoly. 'And Avimelech said

37. *Bereshit Rabbah* 64:6

to Yitzchak: "Leave us. You have become more powerful than we."' Yitzchak's flocks crowded out the denizens' pasture needs and spelled the friendship's demise.

Forced out of town, Yitzchak settled on Gerar's *wadi* outskirts. But there was a score to settle. 'And Yitzchak went back and dug those wells that had been dug in his father Avraham's time. The Pelishtim had buried them after Avraham died.' Asserting suzerainty, Yitzchak called the newly functioning basins by the original names that Avraham had given them. This, then, was the realization of the remaining Divine promise. Yitzchak stood up for the unclouded title of Pelishtim lands, as part of Israel's territory. The deed to the Holy Land resulted from arduous toil on hostile territory.

'And Yitzchak's servants dug in the *wadi*. They found fresh water.' In contrast to this discovery, earlier riparian disputes had been over reservoirs. 'Gerar's shepherds sued Yitzchak's shepherds saying: "The water is ours."' They claimed that the fresh water sprung from a *wadi* which belonged to Greater Gerar. Yitzchak ignored their clamoring and held on to the spring, calling it *'esek'* – "fuss." The Pelishtim could pout all they liked, but the patriarch was the proprietor. The next well he dug was called *'sitnah'* – "hatred." Escalating tensions would not deter him either. 'And he moved on and dug another reservoir. They left it uncontested. He named it *'rechovot'* explaining that now the Almighty extended (our borders) and we have increased in the land.' In the final analysis, despite being hounded and abused, Yitzchak's portion sprawled. Providence had provided the prophet with safe passage and success.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And he moved from there to Beer Sheva.'

Leaving Gerar on Avimelech's orders did not detract from Yitzchak's overall standing. Actually his prestige was enhanced. The entire region knew of his Midas touch, and it threatened them. Providence placed him beyond harm's way. When he arrived in Beer Sheva, Hashem appeared to him promising, 'I am the Almighty One of your father Avraham. Do not fear for I am with you. I will bless and increase your progeny on account of Avraham My servant.' This prophecy assuaged his worries. Hashem conveyed His assurances that just as Avraham had defeated mighty kings, so too would Yitzchak prevail.

Skirmishes over water would not endanger him. An aura of strength insulated his family.

Beer Sheva was a significant venue for this prophecy because that was where Avraham had received the commandment to offer Yitzchak on Mt. Moriah. After the *akedah* he returned to Beer Sheva, hallowing the spot.[38] Commemorating Mt. Moriah's sacred altar, Yitzchak built this one and sacrificed on it. Shortly following the calming prophecy, palpably favorable consequences resulted. Yitzchak's adversaries, led by King Avimelech, came courting.

'And Avimelech came to him from Gerar with a small contingent along with his top brass.' Surprised but confident Yitzchak bluntly wondered. 'And Yitzchak asked them: "Why did you come to me? You hated me and kicked me out!"' Trying to determine the rationale for this unexpected visit, Yitzchak mulled two possibilities but neither made sense. Paying a social visit is reserved for friends. If they needed something from him then why banish him? Logic dictated keeping the patriarch close.

Baffled, Yitzchak heard their response. 'They told him that his heavenly successes were abundantly manifest. They said: "Let us sign a mutually binding pact."' Avimelech cleared the record. He explained that it was not animosity but rather expedience and political discretion that had motivated him. That is, Yitzchak's fame and money captured people's attention – chalking it up to Divine blessing. For Avimelech to conclude a treaty with a landless, unarmed individual in Gerar would have been humiliating, mocking kingly impotence. By sending Yitzchak far away from his subjects' surveillance, the king knew that he could conclude an accord privately. The patriarch also learned how the king feared Yitzchak's political takeover of his Azah kingdom. He sued for favorable ties on the grounds that Yitzchak had been sent away unmolested, and had amassed his burgeoning fortune within their boundaries. The patriarch accepted.

38. See chapter four, seventh *aliyah*

Fifth *aliyah*

'And he made for them a banquet where they ate and drank.'

Yitzchak and Avimelech concluded a bilateral treaty amidst a lavish banquet. During the daytime festivities they heard the news of the patriarch's shepherds' new water find. 'They told him about the spring which they had drilled, saying: "We found water."' The well was called *'shivah'* in commemoration of a treaty signed in Beer Sheva on that day. The Torah notes how the similar circumstances of the pact-signing – between Avimelech and Avraham – engendered the original naming of that city.[39] Yitzchak and the king bade farewell, departing as friends.

The family's good cheer did not last. The Torah juxtaposes the foreign affair successes with the grief of a souring, unraveling home life. The twins came of marrying age. 'And it was when Esav turned forty that he married a woman named Yehudit daughter of the Hittite Be'eri and Basmat daughter of the Hittite Elon.' It broke his parents' hearts. 'And it caused Yitzchak and Rivkah great consternation.' In contrast to the king's deference and regard displayed to Yitzchak, Esav and his brazen wives brought him and Rivkah shame. Pitifully, his son and daughters-in-law openly scorned patriarchal values. Esav made no effort to curb his wives' foreign cultures. As if the twins had not been different enough from conception, the second generation became even more pronounced. Esav fathered children with Hittite wives, a resounding clash with Yaakov's family, born by wives from Avraham's Aram district. Night and day. Yitzchak had apparently been able to overlook Esav's affront on account of his love for Esav. Rivkah could not. Perhaps, as we shall see now, the taut family dynamics contributed to one of *Tanach*'s most difficult narratives.

§§§

Before taking up the complexities of the stolen blessing, two introductory points are in order. First, a brief treatment of the subject of blessings follows. In *Tanach*, blessings fit into three types or categories:

- Divine blessing that Hashem extends to deserving individuals, lands or nations.
- Man's blessing to Hashem, as a form of recognition, gratitude or salutation.
- An exchange between people.

39. See chapter four, sixth *aliyah*

The first category undoubtedly expresses the Divine desire to grant grace, favor and benefit. When Hashem blessed Avraham[40] it created tangible goodwill and an invaluable asset. Clear-cut, positive accrual shifted to the patriarch's ledger. In contrast, when man blesses the Almighty, for example King David blessing his Protector,[41] it expresses praise and reverence for Hashem. The last category of blessing ranks markedly different than the first two. It conveys sincere hope and a fervent prayer for a recipient. That is, a grantor deeply desires that the beneficiary should find Divine grace and curry favor to merit Hashem's blessing. Priestly benediction[42] is a case in point. The *kohanim*'s blessing attempts to boost a congregation's worthiness. In other words, this third type should be viewed as a powerful aid but is not an actual blessing. Ultimately only Hashem sizes up individuals and grants dispensation where appropriate.

Second, recall that when Hashem set Avraham and his descendants apart for a special providential relationship, it empowered them.[43] With Hashem's direct closeness came the capability to earmark and direct that force to their designated son(s). Thus, Yitzchak transferred his blessing to his son Yaakov. Yisrael passed it, in turn, to his twelve sons.[44] This transmission galvanized the Jewish Mystique. Significantly, the Torah does not record that Avraham blessed Yitzchak. Hashem had personally told Avraham that 'through Yitzchak will your seed pass.'[45] Yishmael was explicitly passed over. The Divine promise and clarity rendered the steering of Avraham's blessing superfluous. Heaven, as it were, directly vetted Yitzchak.

§§§

Coming back to the storyline, Yitzchak contemplated a harrowing challenge. Which son would merit the family's mantle? Yitzchak feared that he would pass on without resolution, and invite fraternal strife. Esav, the paternal and maternal firstborn, was the natural choice. Yaakov's piety tilted towards choosing him. Uncertainty agonized Yitzchak.

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40. See chapters three and four
41. E.g. *Divrei HaYamim* I 29:10–13
42. *Bamidbar* 6:24–26
43. See chapter three, fifth *aliyah*
44. See chapter twelve
45. Chapter four, fifth *aliyah*

Throughout the patriarch's life, he had been waiting for Divine direction. Now he was confronted with two valid candidatures. By Yitzchak's calculation, Esav naturally played the firstborn card, while Yaakov's case cited precedent. Had not Yitzchak the younger son of Avraham supplanted older Yishmael?

Sharing Avraham's legacy was summarily ruled out. Yitzchak faced two very different sons whose respective strengths were at loggerheads with each other. Giving each one a blessing would effectively water down or neutralize it. Yitzchak knew intuitively that one was going take charge, the other tag along. Surveying the benediction history recorded in the Torah, designating leaders and subsidiaries occurs when a qualitative disparity is pronounced. Yaakov, for example, singled out both of Yosef's sons for particular blessings,[46] but Yosef's successive progeny would fall under that pair's jurisdiction. The third patriarch later blessed all of his sons, all prototypical principals. His grown grandchildren were covered by the blessing to their parents. Moshe's parting words also addressed all *Bnei* Yisrael by tribe, not smaller subdivisions.[47]

Breaking the impasse, Yitzchak arrived at an acid test. The patriarchal blessing would break his intellectual deadlock. Heavy-eyed Yitzchak called Esav in for a blessing after having determined that nature cast the deciding vote in his favor. With Esav at the helm, Yitzchak calculated, Yaakov would play second fiddle.

Finally clarity shone. Esav's benediction would goad this wayward and restless son. The patriarch prefaced Esav's blessing with a filial commandment in the hopes of fomenting positive commandment momentum. 'Go to the field and fetch me a catch. Make me delectable game the way I like it. Bring it to me and I will eat it. That way my (sated) soul will bless you before I pass.'

An interesting *Tanach* observation emerges from this episode. It has to do with the seemingly noxious notion of paying money to prophets in exchange for rendering services. Was that kosher? Yitzchak's rationale for demanding food was to create the proper ambience and boost his mood. Physical and emotional wellbeing generated the euphoria that often preceded prophecy.[48] Similarly, throughout *Tanach* the customary practice assumed bringing gifts to prophets was not for remuneration but rather to create the proper mindset.[49]

46. See chapter twelve, second *aliyah*
47. *Devarim* 33
48. See, e.g. *Melachim* II 3:15
49. See, e.g. *Shmuel* I 9:7–8

Yitzchak's powers of prayer were at their height due to his fear of impending death. The thoughts of righteous ones focus intently on the Almighty when they prepare to meet Him. The patriarchal and Mosaic blessings, for example, therefore came just before their givers passed on.

On the surface, Yitzchak's dilemma is not terribly convincing. The verses are explicit regarding Esav's abilities, let alone interest, to carry on the family's path. A perfunctory observation of Esav's lifestyle, personality, and foreign wives all blared. The equity scales weighing Esav's first-born advantage should have tipped heavily in favor of Yaakov's towering stature. At the very least, Yitzchak should have beseeched Hashem for assistance in making the right choice. Perhaps simplistically, no deep-seated reason fit to explain picking Esav. People know all too well that love blinds. Yitzchak was no different. In this case, his discernment matched his eyesight. Both failed him.

Rivkah set out to fix things despite her husband's deliberate attempt to conceal the plan. She had overheard Yitzchak's meat-for-blessing request and swiftly took matters into her own hands. 'And Rivkah said to her son Yaakov: "I heard your father speaking with your brother Esav."' Rivkah's vigilance regarding her son's future had been pronounced since her pregnancy when she learned of the twins' fate. The prophecy bore stark testimony that Yaakov most deserved his father's blessing.

A question arises. If Rivkah had been so sure of Yaakov's ultimate victory over Esav was her concern justified? After all, as discussed, Yitzchak's blessing had only preparatory powers. It could not alter Heaven's decree. Apparently, Rivkah did not fear a switch. She was apprehensive of a protracted struggle, especially if Esav received Yitzchak's help. Prayers uttered can and do penetratingly affect things, bend matters.

Rivkah implemented a scheme that blatantly opposed her husband's wishes because truth to conviction and prophecy moved her more. Additionally, Rivkah had long observed her disrespectful daughters'-in-law behavior that Esav failed to mend. The mere mention of Yitzchak and Avraham's legacy falling into Esav's hands mortified her.

Clarity and quick thinking moved things along. She wanted her husband's blessing because she knew of its earth-shaking potential, and staged it so that it went to Heaven's designate. Rivkah's actions revealed something else, too. She had never divulged the original prophecy's content to Yitzchak. Had she told it

he never would have contravened Hashem's preference. Why did she withhold the vital information? Probably, Rivkah never told Yitzchak the prophecy out of modesty. Maybe she regretted not consulting him on the day 'she went to consult (a man of) Hashem.' Or perhaps she thought telling her husband, also a prophet, seemed superfluous. Did he not possess his own acute prophetic powers? After these latest developments, however, expedience dictated secrecy. Considering Yitzchak's attachment to Esav, she feared upsetting her husband. Perplexed by the intricacies of it all he would walk away altogether from blessing any son, saying that the matter rested in Heaven's court.

A word about the nature of prophecy is in order. Prophets did not initiate any particular course of action or have input with regard to heavenly blueprints. Rather they read them, deciphered, and disseminated them. Often visionaries served as truth's conduit the same way that a mirror projects an image standing in front of it. Prophets may rightly be construed as passive, heavenly mouthpieces. To illustrate, assume that a farmer painstakingly prepares his farmland, fully intending to sow wheat, but erringly sows barley. Soil is not an actor and therefore cannot direct wheat to sprout. Rather, the fertile topsoil is a tool. Only barley will grow when barley seeds were sowed. Yitzchak's prophetic foreshadowing reflects this. It moved through him but not by him. Willy-nilly, Yitzchak would be stirred to shower his younger son with the appropriate blessing. Once in place, a benediction was an irrevocable trust. Yitzchak will have crafted a window in Yaakov's soul through which heavenly illumination would shine, and the father would be powerless to shut it.

While pregnant, Rivkah had already learned how the big picture identified and acknowledged Yaakov's domination. If Yaakov succeeded now in procuring Yitzchak's blessing then Yaakov's descendants' struggle with Esav would likely become somewhat easier to bear. The fateful stakes in the context of pogroms, wars, or holocausts cannot be underestimated. Considering Esav's ruthless enmity, lighter burdens could conceivably save untold numbers of Jewish communities throughout the long exiles. Rivkah had grasped all this. Her plan hinged, of course, on the fact that recipient Yaakov deserved his father's blessing. The final forefather's qualities, indeed, made him very fertile ground.

Taking stock of the matriarch's unfolding plan and rationale behind it, one wonders why things had heretofore spun out of control. After all, this was not the first time an elder son got dethroned by a younger one. Hashem's

inspiration to Sarah and later affirmation of the prophecy to Avraham, though painful, surgically removed Yishmael. Why the clumsy convolution now? Heaven's plan did not want to force Yitzchak into blessing Yaakov against his will. Banishing Esav would have been, perhaps, too herculean a task. Given Yitzchak's attachment to his son, it presented a horrendous scenario for the ancient patriarch. Had Esav's removal followed Yishmael's model, who knows how Yitzchak would have lived out his days? Procuring the blessing for Yaakov would have likely been scuttled since the prophetic blessing demanded contentment if not euphoria.[50] Inconsolable Yitzchak might barely have been able to hold up his head, let alone his hands.

The subterfuge accomplished another aim. Snatching Yitzchak's blessing in such a sneaky way was sure to ignite Esav's short fuse. The two brothers' dynamo fed on constant friction. Filching Esav's blessing from his fingertips, so to speak, contributed to keeping the enmity at high pitch, furnace hot. Unintentionally, Rivkah's plan helped stoke fires for millennia. Heaven's Jewish survival formula, though challenging, read: strict adherence to the Torah's commandments affords protection from Esav's machinations.[51]

'And Esav went to the field in order to hunt and bring back provisions.' Precious little time to act harried Rivkah. The covert operation sprang. Or rather, it was supposed to spring. Rivkah latched on to the idea of preparing some food for her husband, inducing him to prayerfully groom the blessing's recipient. However, when the matriarch revealed the plan to Yaakov he was, to understate, cool to it. 'And Yaakov said to Rivkah his mother: "Wait. Esav my brother is hairy whereas I am not."' Yaakov originally nixed her idea, not least of all, on technical grounds.

Yaakov's logic certainly held validity. Given their distinct physical traits, all Yitzchak needed to do was slightly brush Yaakov's arm to reveal foul play. 'Maybe my father will feel me.' Certainly during father-son bonding moments, Yitzchak could be expected to affectionately hold his arm, stroke his face. 'I will be an imposter in his eyes.' Exposed duplicity, Yaakov ventured, opened him to his father's wrath.

First, Yaakov attempted crisis management. It did not seem disastrous to let Esav receive the father's blessings. Yaakov could then ask for his own

50. BT *Shabbat* 30b
51. Cf. first *aliyah* above

blessing. However, his reasoning continued, if he got caught, not only would there be no blessing. Given Yitzchak's penchant for truth, Yaakov's lie would likely land him a nasty curse instead.

Three reasons elucidate why Yaakov envisioned his cover being blown by Yitzchak's tactile sense, but did not fear detection on account of his different voice:

- Yaakov thought he would not need to speak. His mother's concept called for bringing a meal and sitting tight.
- Even considering an unlikely scenario whereby he needed to speak, he figured his impersonation of Esav would pass muster. Some commentators understood that the twin brothers' voices were practically identical. (Yitzchak's later exclamation identifying Yaakov's voice had to do with content, not pitch.)
- Ancient thinkers graded each of man's senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) by primary and secondary levels of reliability. While man's cognition accurately identifies the primary characteristics of each respective sense, secondary groupings are far less precise. The verification of identity via the stark contrast of those hirsute or bald is more dependable than relatively indistinct audio. In this narrative's context, Yaakov relied on the inherently illusive nature of sounds and voice to throw his father off track.

Rivkah had anticipated the possible glitches, swiftly improvising. 'And his mother told him: "My son, I will assume the curse. Just listen to me and go get it."' Why did she think it possible to absorb the execration hurled at her son? Were curses really as transferable as, say, chattel? Rivkah, in essence, took the full brunt. She believed if apprehended, Yaakov would not get pummeled by Yitzchak's venting and anger. That was because, in the first place, Yitzchak would take out his wrath on whoever had eavesdropped on his conversation with Esav and acted upon the information. The fault in that arena fell at Rivkah's feet. Second, Rivkah knew her husband's nature. Yitzchak would not actually wish horrible tribulations on his fury's subject. He would resort to heckling and name-calling against the instigator. Astute Yitzchak could be relied upon to know that such a plan must have originated with Rivkah and not Yaakov. He would insult her, not Yaakov.

'And he brought (the goats) to his mother and she prepared delectable food the way his father liked it.' Yaakov may have balked but Rivkah's determination carried the day. Still she did have much to extemporize. Yaakov needed to be properly attired. But how to match Esav's wardrobe style and scent to Yaakov? Rivkah pinched. 'And Rivkah took her elder son Esav's dress wardrobe stored in her house and clothed her younger son Yaakov.' The Torah highlights the incongruity of a mother stacking the deck in favor of a younger sibling. Rivkah tweaked and honed her scheme until it all fell into place. Ever mindful of Avraham's prophecy, Rivkah's scheme was, in fact, Heaven's decree. 'And she placed goat skins on his arms and around his smooth neck.'

Disguised, Yaakov entered Yitzchak's room, bringing fresh bread with his father's favorite dish. Tension, drama, and fear slipped into Yitzchak's domain. 'Who comes here?' Yitzchak asked. 'It is I, Esav, your firstborn. I have done as you have commanded.' Yaakov projected confidence. Had not the youngest patriarch purchased Esav's firstborn rights fair and square? For all intents and purposes and as far as Yitzchak was concerned, the young man serving him food undoubtedly deserved and earned firstborn status.

Yitzchak, taken aback, began probing, stalling. Something did not sit right. Confused, he interrogated, 'So fast, my son?' Yaakov answered, 'Hashem wrought it before me.' In Yaakov's mind, the lightning-speed success had been due to Rivkah's fast-order plan and cooking. Yitzchak thought that his son had humbly referred to his hunting prowess. Still perplexed, the hoary patriarch motioned Yaakov closer. 'Son, now come closer so I can feel whether you are really my son Esav.' Stroking Yaakov's hairy getup, Yitzchak could not shake his confusion, cognitive dissonance. He groped. 'He said: "Esav's arms. Yaakov's voice."' How peculiar...*misfit*...

The patriarch wondered why his sense perceptions played tricks on him. His ears heard Yaakov's voice but his hands touched Esav's hairy arms. Though Yitzchak resolved to bestow Avraham's legacy upon the man in his house, he held back the actual blessing. One more test should do the trick, assuage his last lingering doubts. The patriarch hoped to draw out a possible pretender with a contrived conversation evoking more reliable voice recognition. He asked: 'My son, Esav, is this really you?' Wisely and laconically, Yaakov only answered 'aye.' No new information had been gleaned. Yitzchak weighed his choices. Touch trumped hearing.

Yaakov passed the preliminaries. 'Son, serve me the meal now that my soul may bless you.' After serving the food, Yaakov poured his father wine which he drank. Barring any last-minute glitches, receiving his father's blessing appeared a foregone conclusion. Still, minesweepers tread gingerly until exiting booby-trapped zones. Yaakov steadied his nerves for the very last hurdle, the longest yard. Before dispensing the blessing, there would be a last ditch trial – the sense of smell. 'And he served him drink. He smelled his clothing, blessed him saying: "Look, my son bears the field's scent. He must be Heaven-blessed."' The patriarch fully concentrated on Esav's distinct odor. He inhaled a strong whiff of a hunter's gamy garb. The meal's satisfaction enhanced the moment's euphoria. The wafting blessed fields and intoxicating nectar created a superb symphony and a magnificent inspiration. Yitzchak understood that Hashem had vetted the person standing before him.

Sixth *aliyah*

'And the Almighty should grant you heaven's dew, the fat of the land and abundant grain and vine.'

The patriarch recognized a distinct possibility that it was Yaakov standing before him, and tossed blessing's dice. Esav or Yaakov – regardless – was the legatee to Divine Providence and the Promised Land. The balance rested in Hashem's hands. Blessing gushed.

What blessing did Yitzchak pray would accrue to the recipient? Yaakov would be bound to his father and grandfather's Divine covenant with Hashem. It dictated to him that, like the first two patriarchs, Hashem's providential existence carried grave responsibility as well as privilege. Yaakov learned that the sole inheritance of Israel became the natural venue to carry out Hashem's commandments and Torah ways. Since financial security coupled with the absence of an outside threat or menace complements spiritual pursuits,[52] Yitzchak's blessing began '*and* (besides the primary Abrahamic blessing bequest) the Almighty should grant you heaven's dew, the fat of the land and abundant grain and vine. Nations will serve you, peoples prostrate to you. You shall be the master of your brothers, and your mother's children will bow down to you. Those who curse you are cursed while those who bless you are blessed.'

52. Cf. *Rambam's* preface to *Perek Chelek*

Alternatively, the passage refers directly to the covenantal elements. "Heaven's dew" meant Divine Providence,[53] and "fat of the earth" alluded to a Land flowing with milk and honey.

The plainer text understanding of "heaven" and "earth" indicates perceiving Yitzchak's blessing in terms of a calculated measure. That is, all aspects of the repast preparations became the blessing's basis. Consider that choice ingredients, superb cooking, exceptional food and beverage presentation and service created tastes and flavors of a gourmet culinary experience. In turn, the patriarch itemized each stage of a master chef's *éclat* for Yaakov's reward. Yitzchak's banquet got passed down as a flowing benediction.

FEAST FEATURE	BLESSING
Water for washing up	Heaven's dew (abundant rain)
Meat	Fat of the land
Bread	Abundant grain
Wine	Abundant vine
Service	Nations will serve you

Yitzchak, mindful that Yaakov may have been pretending, hedged. 'May you be a ruler over your brothers' – whoever you are. Top-positioning vis-a-vis his 'mother's sons' extended to Lavan and Betuel's family members, or Yaakov's nephews. If Esav had been the meal's maîtres d', then Yitzchak intended to dispense to his son fitting firstborn blessings. Concluding the far-reaching designation, Yitzchak invoked austere verification and acknowledgement. 'Those who curse you are cursed while those who bless you are blessed.'

Yitzchak invoked the Name of *Elohim* (connoting Divine Justice) as opposed to Hashem's Four-Letter Name in recognition of the blessing's conditional nature – only worthy recipients would enjoy it. This phrasing clearly precluded Esav from acquiring the covenantal benediction.

"Timely" inadequately describes Yaakov's departure from his father. Split seconds stayed a family tsunami. No sooner did Yaakov take leave of Yitzchak than Esav returned from his killing field with fresh game. 'And it happened

53. The Sages (BT *Shabbat* 88b) viewed heaven's dew symbolically to include the promise of the revival of the dead. See *Yeshayahu* 26:19. See also Abravanel's *Mayenei HaYeshuah* 11:8–9 for a fuller discussion.

that when Yitzchak finished blessing Yaakov – that very moment when Yaakov had taken leave of his father Yitzchak's presence – Esav his brother arrived from his hunt.' Jewish tradition records[54] that when Esav entered, Yaakov had not had time to leave. He hid behind a jarred-opened door!

'And he said to his father: "Arise and partake of your son's game so that your soul may bless me."' Acting stunned, 'And Yitzchak his father asked: "Who are you?" And he answered: "It is I, your firstborn son, Esav."' Initially Yitzchak wondered if Yaakov had now arrived, desirous of his father's blessing. However, when Yitzchak heard Esav fully identify himself, the patriarch's mind's eye lit up. Mentally he fully conceded Heaven's blessing had struck Yaakov, its intended mark.

The puzzle pieces fell perfectly into place. Yaakov pulled it off. The patriarch's new-gained wisdom and calm did not last, though, because a new challenge presented itself. He realized that Esav's savagery could well be scathing. Considering his son's potential backlash, the best course was to present his son feigned mortification. He told the thug nothing of the rigorous testing he had put Yaakov through, presenting a persuasive picture that there was absolutely no reason to doubt that the blessings' recipient was Esav.

'And Yitzchak trembled with great agitation. He asked: "Who hunted game, bringing that which I ate before your arrival? I have blessed him. And blessed he is."' Perhaps Esav knew of another mighty hunter capable of perpetrating this deed. Did he see anyone abruptly leave the room? Yitzchak asked if that mystery hunter had been a stranger then how was he privy to know his favorite dish?

Another weird thing. Yitzchak admitted that despite his advanced age and suppressed appetite he ate the entire meal. The last peculiar detail surrounded the speed in which it all took place. The hunting, cooking, serving, eating, drinking and blessing had hastily transpired. Yitzchak hoped that talking out each aspect would brace Esav for letdown. Namely since all this occurred, 'then surely he (Yaakov) is blessed.' Occasionally, Hashem's plan twists inexplicably. Other times it cascades flawlessly.

The angle worked. Esav genuinely believed that his hoodwinked father had expressed regret. Digesting his disenfranchisement 'he cried profusely and bitterly. He appealed: "Father, also bless me."' Esav assumed a blessing

54. *Bereshit Rabbah* 66:5

was an automatic *quid pro quo* for food services rendered. Yitzchak could lend parity, bestowing his fatherly blessing on both brothers as a fallback position.

Gradually Yitzchak revealed more. When he did it caused Esav to rethink matters, see red. 'And he (Yitzchak) said that his brother had come deceitfully, taking his blessing.' Avraham's legacy had slipped away – been ripped away – from Esav. Forever. Esav barely managed to hear that Yitzchak granted Yaakov exclusivity over the Holy Land in addition to Divine Providence promises. The last straw was when Yitzchak revealed that a *bone fide* transfer occurred with no grounds for rescission.

Immediately, Esav's predictable slings and arrows arched and flew. Thrashing, name-calling thundered. 'My brother's name revealed his inner nature because he has swindled me twice. His name means the one who cheats. First, he took my birthright. Now, he swipes my blessing.' Turning to his father, Esav pleaded, 'But surely you reserved a blessing for me.' Esav charged that Yaakov must have known that he would not escape detection due to their differing voices and complexions. His father was not duped! He must have left firstborn blessings for Esav.

Yitzchak stuck with his original storyline. He had not intended to tamper with Esav's natural firstborn privileges. Blessing Yaakov with family supremacy proved it. The patriarch would not have flipped the primogeniture for he clearly assumed Esav had been the recipient. Heaven, not Yitzchak, ordained it. Indeed, orchestrated it. *And with that new piece of information about selling your birthright, you could not have explained it any better...*

Maybe for the first time, Yitzchak's early, dormant concerns about errant Esav fully registered. Yitzchak understood that he had narrowly escaped misreading his twins' destinies. That changed. 'And Yitzchak answered saying to Esav: "In truth I have placed him master over you. Your brothers will serve him. I buttressed his blessing with grain and vine."' The patriarch had been enlightened and liberated.

Esav was reduced to begging for a party favor, a booby prize. 'That unique blessing (of Avraham's legacy) is indivisible. Bless me with something!' A bushel. A barrel. Did Yaakov have to get it all? 'Esav lifted his voice and wept.'

Yitzchak compassionately acquiesced to his son's request and blessed him. 'Your dwellings shall wax fertile.' Yitzchak continued. 'You will live by the sword and serve your brother.' Alluding to what would become western

civilization's single greatest rivalry, Yitzchak had this to presage. 'When you dominate, then you will remove his yoke from your neck.'

The vague messages of his descendants' militancy and conditional family role reversals rooted deep in Esav's psyche. Specifically, Esav learned about four historic and major developments:

- Yitzchak apprised him that his descendants will acquire luscious and verdant lands. That did not refer to Har Seir southeast of Canaan which was barren but rather to distant future conquests in Europe.
- Militancy and brute power would turn his seed into formidable marauders, armies, and armadas. Brandishing an occupier's sword, Esav's arsenal shunned free marketplace dialogues, vigorous idea debates, and participatory democracy.
- Yaakov's edge over Esav would prove ineradicable, immutable. This began in King David[55] and Shlomoh's[56] eras and continued with each successive king's reigns. Those centuries (tenth to fifth B.C.E.) witnessed Esav's sovereignty reduced to vassal status. Jewish sin during the later king's periods resulted in political and military reverses.[57] However, during the Second Temple period hegemony had been regained. This all happened when Esav was in his Edom homeland.
- The patriarch informed Esav that Jewish iniquity unshackled an albatross, extricating him. The second Temple's destruction brought Jewish exile and exemplified the patriarch's prophecy. Indeed, when Esav's descendants made their way to Europe, total and full independence from Yaakov was achieved.[58] Yitzchak's prophetic eye saw beyond the second Temple exile. He foretold that Yaakov again would take hold of Esav's heel, flooring him. Providence promised nothing less. End of days' prophecies predict Esav's autonomous run faltering, failing. The topic has been the theme of major and minor prophets.[59] Eschatological destruction and apocalypse mark significant segments of their messages.

55. See *Shmuel* II 8:14 and *Melachim* I 11:15–16
56. See *Melachim* I 5:1
57. See *Melachim* I 22:48
58. See *Abravanel* to *Yeshayahu* 54 et al for a fuller treatment.
59. See *Yeshayahu*, *Yechezkel*, *Zecharia*, *Ovadya*, and *Daniyel*

Spoiler roles figured low on what Esav had hoped to extract from his father. Resentment seethed, lodging deep-seated, eternal, loathing for Yaakov. 'And Esav hated Yaakov on account of the blessing that his father had blessed him. Esav plotted to wait until his father's passing and then (vowed) to slay Yaakov his brother.' Esav misread his father's words. Instead of understanding the living by the sword blessing as signaling powerful armies, he took it as sound advice. Perversely, he saw his dagger as an implement to relieve Yaakov's millstone. Esav lacked the patience to wait for his brother's downfall; he desired to precipitate it by backstabbing. Since his success depended upon discretion, Esav determined the optimal timing.

Murder is delicate. If it took place while Yitzchak was still alive, it would cause his father great pain. If Esav pushed off fratricide until after his father's death then Yaakov might flee. Precision's window of opportunity determined knifing Yaakov as his father lay dying.[60] Secrecy needed to guide Esav but an itchy trigger finger's exuberance spoiled things. He blurted to friends.

'And Esav her older son's words were told to Rivkah. She sent and called to Yaakov her younger son.' Again the verse labels Rivkah's sons as older and younger, this time with a negative emphasis on Esav. It scoured him. Instead of an older brother's comforting and solacing role at the patriarch's death, he would inflict more pain upon his reeling loved ones. She said to him: "Esav is planning to console you (for father's death) by murdering you."' The verse can also be read as Rivkah telling Yaakov that Esav's charade was just that. Don't fall for it. 'And now listen, my son. Arise and flee to my brother Lavan in Charan.' Rivkah relied on her brother's strength to ward off Esav should he track Yaakov there.

Esav eventually pieced all the parts together, resulting in fury towards every family member. 'Dwell there (Charan) with him for the long term until your brother's rage against me and you subsides.' Considering Esav's poison for his mother and brother, Rivkah conceivably saw Yaakov's sojourn with Lavan in terms of decades. And given Yaakov's physical prowess[61] which rendered him fully capable of slaying stalking Esav, Rivkah envisioned blood revenge by Esav's sons. 'Why should I lose both of you in one day?'

60. Some interpret Esav's words to mean that he planned to have Yitzchak mourn over Yaakov sooner than his father might have liked.
61. See chapter seven, second *aliyah*

The matriarch improvised a secret exit plan that would not implicate her collusion. She feared a harsh reaction should Yitzchak learn of his wife's decisive role in a scheme that culminated in Esav's revenge plot. Rivkah, therefore, scrambled to reframe Yaakov's urgent need to leave home. Had she not insisted on Yaakov looking for a wife in Charan then she would have a specter to confront: her sons' backyard gang warfare. Firefighting on all fronts, Rivkah stressed Yaakov's need to find the right match from the right family. She urged Yitzchak to send Yaakov away immediately. This plausible pretext did not arouse suspicion because Yaakov had reached maturity and marriageable readiness. It was time for him to settle down with a wife and family.

'And Yitzchak called Yaakov, blessed him, and commanded him saying: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman."' Interestingly, Rivkah pointed Yaakov to Lavan whereas Yitzchak saw Betuel as the proper address. 'Go to your mother's father Betuel's house in Padan Aram.' The patriarch desired to enlist him since his age and experience would better serve Yaakov's interest in finding the right match. Rivkah wanted Lavan's youth for defending Yaakov.

Yaakov's trek, bereft of traveling companions and cash, highly exposed his personal safety. Yitzchak countered his son's vulnerability. 'And the Almighty should bless you, multiply and increase you. You shall grow into populous nations.' The patriarch presaged great things in terms of his personal and business life. Reaffirming the blessings dispensed after reaching his sensual euphoria, Yitzchak reiterated. 'And (the Almighty) should give you Avraham's blessing – to you and your descendants together with you. To inherit the land of your dwellings which Hashem gave to Avraham.'

Seventh *aliyah*

'And Yitzchak sent Yaakov away. He went to Padan Aram where Lavan son of Betuel of Aram was. He was Yaakov and Esav's mother Rivkah's brother.'

Yaakov did not feel a personal need to flee from Esav. The youngest patriarch dutifully travelled to Lavan on his mother's urging. He believed his uncle had the negotiating savvy to broker a *détente*. Lavan also possessed impartiality since he was uncle to both combatants. This rings likely because if Yaakov's only goal was to hide from his brother, he would have gone to destinations unlikely to welcome Esav.

From Esav's perspective, he had not even remotely considered his brother's departure a badge of cowardice. His express motivation centered on finding a wife. 'And Esav saw that Yitzchak had blessed Yaakov and sent him to Padan Aram to marry a woman from there. His blessing commanded him saying: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman."' Esav noted two observations. One, despite Rivkah and Yaakov's underhandedness, Yitzchak stuck by his words. Sending Yaakov to look for a Charan wife highlighted his patriarchal destiny. Two, Yaakov complied with his parent's instructions. He had a mission.

'And Esav saw that the Canaanite women were evil in his father Yitzchak's eyes.' Esav regarded his father's opinion but not his mother's. For Esav, she represented betrayal. Her designs lost him the firstborn blessings. Blinded Esav attributed his forfeit to bad spousal choices. Rivkah's animosity toward Yehudit and Basmat, assumed Esav, had poisoned Yitzchak to the point of passive collaboration.

Resolved to ingratiate himself with his father, Esav sought out a wife from outside Canaan. 'And Esav went to Yishmael and married Machalat daughter of Yishmael son of Avraham sister of Nevayot in addition to his wives.' Convoluted thinking manifested itself in great folly. If Esav reasoned that Canaanite wives were sore points then marrying Machalat made sense. What utterly lacked logic was keeping the two peccant wives who so disappointed his parents in the first place.

But, thinking and logic carried little weight in Esav's world of sham.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PARASHAT VAYETZE

STORIED LADDER

First *aliyah*

'And Yaakov left Beer Sheva and went to Charan.'

The previous *parashah* roundly informed readers of the circumstances that forced Yaakov to flee home and go to Padan Aram. Why does *Vayetze* open with a seeming repetition of the refugee's travel itinerary? Simply, the previous *parashah's* concluding verses' interlude took up Esav's new wives. *Parashat Vayetze* brings us back to the main storyline. Yaakov's spouse search took him to distant lands, to Charan. En route, a serendipitous surprise lay in store for the young patriarch.

Significantly, Yaakov's journey began, the verse teaches, in Beer Sheva. Yaakov's first prophetic impulse related to the city from where he escaped. Beer Sheva associations conjured up the secure feelings of home, parents and grandparents. His religious, familial and emotional experiences there had nurtured the young man, honed his patriarchal essence. Anxiety and angst surrounded Yaakov's leaving Beer Sheva, and unsettled him. He found fleeing his loved ones and the holy land most disorienting. Yaakov had no delusions as to what awaited him in Charan either. Lavan's double-dealing reputation aptly fit Aram's entire milieu; the place seethed with hucksters. Hashem's upcoming message to him intended to ease a heavy heart. As a combined result of three anomalies, a most fitting venue set the scene:

- En route, distraught Yaakov shunned both city distractions and comfortable country inns. Apropos, he planned to sleep off-road when dusk descended. Inexplicably Yaakov veered off course 'and he chanced upon the place' – Mt. Moriah.

- 'He lodged there since the sun had set.' Summer travelers typically take advantage of the evening hours to cover more miles, and even autumn wayfarers venture on until nightfall. Queerly, Yaakov made camp early.
- Instead of continuing to normal sleeping arrangements in proximate Luz, he sought isolation, hunkering on that city's outskirts.

Thus three disparate peculiarities closed rank as Yaakov's makeshift dwelling prepared him for his pilot prophecy. Nothing was accidental about it; Divine Providence had taken Yitzchak's troubled son by the hand. 'And he took some rocks from the place, putting them around his head.' These were no ordinary rocks. Yaakov's *mazal* guided him fortuitously to the place most conducive to receiving Divine inspiration – Yitzchak's altar. 'And he lay down at the place.'

The phrase "the place" gets triplicated. ('He chanced upon *the place* and lodged there since the sun had set'; 'He took some rocks from *the place*, putting them around his head'; 'He lay down at *the place*.') Allusion is made to the convergence of the three fortuitous details mentioned above.

Alternatively, the thrice-used phrase represents an example of the Sages'[1] phrase *ma'asei avot simman labanim* – the acts of the forefathers resound and carry significance for their Jewish descendants. Yaakov is hereby credited with consecrating and delineating the borders of the three future Holy Temples.

Ominously, sunset portended the destruction of the first. Taking only *some* of the rocks conveyed a stark contrast between Shlomoh and Ezra's sanctuaries. The first one bespoke grandeur and an acutely intense *Shechinah* presence while the second lacked comparable prominence.[2] As for *mashiach's* Third Temple, Yaakov lying down in the place connotes intrinsic permanence.

Yaakov's wandering to Mt. Moriah was, indeed, anything but aimless. Though Yaakov seemingly trudged further away from Divine closeness with each footfall out of his father's halcyon surroundings, it was not the case. In fact, the Almighty had plotted a transformational emprise.

'And he dreamt. Behold a ladder standing firmly on the ground, its top reaching the heavens. Behold Hashem's *malachim* ascended and descended upon it.' The Almighty stood over Yaakov and identified Himself. 'I am Hashem, Deity of your father Avraham and of Yitzchak. The land upon which you lie I give to you and your descendants. And your seed will be like the dust

1. Cf. *Tanchuma Lech Lecha* 9
2. Cf. BT *Yoma* 21b

of the earth, bursting west, east, north and south. And through you and your descendants, all nations of the world will be blessed.' The prophecy concluded, 'I [Hashem] am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land, for I will not forsake you until I have done that which I have promised to you.' Awestruck, Yaakov awoke. 'And Yaakov stirred from his slumber. He said: "Verily Hashem is in this place and I did not know it."'

Few topics have excited rabbinic resourcefulness as much as this one. Ladder imagery, mystical *malachim*, a galloping montage of mind and spirit – what does it mean? What did Yaakov see? Traditional Sages[3] and classical commentators endeavor to explain the storied ladder's secrets. Metaphysical symbolism, Jewish destiny and Hashem's workings in the universe encapsulate a few approaches. Students questing for this ladder's truth and meaning must consider a crucial foreword. Which expositor best answers the question: How does the ladder dream relate to Yaakov's present mindset en route to Charan?

As we have seen in previous *parshiyot*, prophecy's purpose was often to assuage fears, anxieties and self-doubt. Yaakov's quandary came, at least partly, as a result of Esav shedding his brotherly mask. With war declared, a collision appeared inevitable. In the previous *parashah,* Rivkah merely stalled matters by sending Yaakov to Charan. Yaakov still had plenty of existential matters to sort out. As he confronted a new reality, soul-searching ensued. Grappling with the long-term implications, the forefather assessed vital, pressing issues: Will Esav murder him? How will he survive, let alone manage? Prospects of a permanent pariah and fugitive status sent Yaakov's naturally academic personality reeling.

Throbbing insecurity plagued him in other ways. Journeying with only an indigent shepherd's rod and lacking a basic change of clothing, Yaakov's shame of penury exacerbated matters. Cold and penniless, he wondered how to feed poverty's growling stomach.

Incessantly, self-doubt gnawed. He put his finger on what perturbed him most. Had buying Esav's birthright firstborn blessing been morally wrong? The guilt-ridden patriarch questioned if he had violated Heaven's ethos. If Yaakov failed his Maker, then perhaps Charan represented the first leg of endless, driving punishment and wandering? Was this Hashem's curse to a crestfallen patriarch?

3. *Bereshit Rabbah* 68; *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 35

The Almighty steadily commandeered Yaakov to his father's craggy altar, and brought him clarity. Answers arrived in the form of prophecy and Divine blessing. Yaakov's acts had been vindicated, approved. Most pleased, Hashem sought to assure him that Rivkah's plan and Yaakov's execution ranked praiseworthy. Underscoring the Divine validation, Hashem echoed and seconded Yitzchak's bequest of the Abrahamic legacy to Yaakov.

Note the three specific Divine promises to Avraham encased in this ladder vision: Providence, inheritance and multitudes. First, the rung-ladder running from earth to heaven taught Divine Providence. Yaakov learned that Mt. Moriah would host the *mikdash*. Man's quintessential relationship with his Maker stood at the place's core. Zion bonds man with his Creator. As a consequence of this closeness, Heaven sends abundance and prosperity to the entire world. Ladders connect and facilitate reciprocity. *Malachim* serve as Hashem's functionaries. Inspired *mikdash* services, sacrifices and prayers crank Heaven's levers, so to speak, and move the Almighty's vaulted apparatus.

Hashem stood over Yaakov to convey the intensity of Providence's embrace. Yaakov had been chosen to follow Yitzchak and Avraham. Note Avraham is referred to as 'your father,' despite being Yaakov's grandfather. This is in recognition of Yishmael and Keturah's offspring having been expelled and disinherited from collective Jewish posterity, legacy and will. Yaakov already knew that Esav had been ousted.

'The land upon which you lie I give to you and to your descendants.' With the property's deed and title came comfort. Few appurtenances soothe a man's apprehensions more than his home, his table and his bed – be they simple and humble. Man feels better when he is grounded. By extension, a country anchors a nation. The Jewish Nation always has its homeland. This aspect of the dream told Yaakov to look beyond his threadbare reality, his sole present possession – a shepherd's stick – because the Holy Land belongs exclusively to him and to his descendants.

'And your seed will be like dust of the earth, bursting west, east, north and south.' This third and final blessing presaged a nation of multitudes. Travelling alone, Yaakov's mind's eye saw throngs of people, his children. True, this current journey's leg lacked parents and familiar environs. And heading to Charan had swelled his pangs of loneliness. The patriarch foresaw his progeny in northern Charan, central Shechem, and southern Egypt. That

final sojourn would be accompanied by his children and grandchildren, subsequently sprouting teeming throngs exposed to a barbaric, Egyptian-exile drubbing, as dust under Paroah's tyrannical boots. Ultimately, 'and through you and your descendants, all nations of the world will be blessed' – Yaakov would be the prototypical prolific patriarch.

The quadripartite expansion of Yaakov's descendants might more readily refer to the twelve tribes' arrangement in their desert travels,[4] all falling under the Yaakov/Yisrael designation. Yaakov gained his first inkling of his future four wives and twelve sons.

When Hashem promised, 'I am with you,' Yaakov's fear of Esav subsided. 'I will protect you wherever you go' assuaged his apprehension of Lavan and fellow unsavory Arameans, despite his departure from the Holy Land's heavenly force field. A Divine guarantee laid out to the patriarch that he would yet return to his beloved homeland. Perforce, the fulfillment of the promise to Avraham rendered the legatee Yaakov invincible.

The patriarch awoke, flabbergasted. A sea change swelled within him. 'Verily Hashem is in this place and I did not know it.' Until the dream, Yaakov deliberated much regarding maintaining his spirituality as a lone truth-seeker. He surmised that piety only grew and nurtured among a cadre of likeminded travelers. Leaving Beer Sheva vexed his soul because it meant abandoning Yitzchak's aura. Young Yaakov believed holy sparks required fraternity. Prophecy pried open his horizons as he began to comprehend Zion's otherworldliness. Certainly, the peak was only imbued with sanctity on account of the mortals' missions thereupon – the *akedah*, and Yaakov's own vision of the *mikdash*. But for Yaakov, Jerusalem intrinsically possessed power. The mountain harnesses human heroism. Not only a company of righteous moves and shakes heavens. Mt. Moriah can, too.

Yaakov exclaimed, 'How awesome is this place' – *did I treat it properly? Did I just sleep in Hashem's sanctum sanctorum?* 'This must be the House of the Almighty. The Gates of Heaven.' Here, heaven and earth embrace.

'And Yaakov pledged saying: "If Hashem will be with me, watch over me on this road that I now travel, providing me with bread to eat and clothing. If I return in peace to my father's household, then Hashem will be my God,

4. See *Bamidbar* 2

this rock which I placed as a monument will be the house of Hashem, and all that which You give me, I will tithe to You."'

Classical commentators are troubled by Yaakov's response to the ladder dream. Why did the patriarch seemingly place conditions, so to speak, on Hashem's future performance? Plausibly, neophyte seer Yaakov doubted if the ladder vision was, in fact, prophecy. *Tanach* records and ascribes similar disbelief to Shmuel.[5] More likely, Yaakov was certain of having received a Divine communication. The condition, therefore, sought to probe Heaven's promise. The ladder images included vast arrays of distant forecasts – some personal, others national. Obviously, Yaakov knew he could not accompany the Jews throughout millennia. However, he proposed that if Hashem would provide him with life's basics such as bread, clothing, and a return ticket home – irrespective of personal merit or sin – then the patriarch would be assured of the unconditional fruition regarding Jewish history's balance. He could be certain that his offspring's destiny featured: 'Hashem will be my God (i.e. Providence), this rock which I placed as a monument will be the house of Hashem, and all that which You give me (read – to my children), I will tithe to You (and they will bring those tithes to the *Beit HaMikdash*).'

Second *aliyah*

'And Yaakov hauled himself up and traveled to the easterners' land.'

Not surprisingly Jerusalem and Yaakov were an excellent match and natural pair. The place spoke to him and he did not want to leave. Iron discipline was needed to budge him from the hallowed ground, Heaven's gateway. The Sages[6] read Yaakov's departure (and the phrase describing it) differently. Emboldened and empowered by the anticipation of great things and protective guarantee, Yaakov virtually fluttered away.

Leaving his family and homeland, Yaakov arrived in Charan. 'And behold he saw there a well in a field and three attended flocks of sheep nestling down next to it.' Dire straits had sapped Yaakov yet within a short while Hashem had renewed his vitality – Yaakov 'removed the [well's] boulder covering' by himself. That job generally entailed several shepherds' cooperation.

5. See *Shmuel* I 3:1–10
6. *Bereshit Rabbah* 70:8

Commentators[7] extrapolate a lesson for posterity – Hashem invigorates his faithful servants. Likely, this arid region lacked ample rainfall prompting Charan folks to seal their springs with weighty lids to deter marauders.

Apart from giving us a taste of local color, why did the Torah include the entirety of the episode at the well? The Sages[8] associated the well with the *mikdash* and the three flocks with Jewish pilgrimage three times annually. Drawing water corresponded to spiritual inspiration. Countrywide, Jews would flock to the *mikdash* thrice yearly to draw Divine inspiration. Other Sages[9] viewed the spring as Mt. Sinai and the three flocks as representing *Kohanim*, *Leviim,* and *Yisraelim*. The fresh water matched up with the Ten Commandments given at the holy mount. Furthermore, the tremendous rock lid lined up with the mystical *Shechinah*.

Continuing the metaphor motif, Yaakov may have read two favorable personal omens into this pastoral setting. First, Yaakov attributed a water-well allusion to Hashem's Life-Giver role mirroring the earlier verse 'Behold I [Hashem] will be with you.' He understood the three resting flocks to represent the three patriarchs – Avraham, Yitzchak, and himself, Yaakov. All three men drew sublime meaning by adhering to Hashem's ways. That was the sparkling, refreshing water. The spring's rock top suggested the altar he reestablished upon Mt. Moriah, the *mikdash*'s foundation. Yaakov's fired imagination cast the flock's shepherds as evil gentile nations arising to remove the spring's covering and destroy the *mikdash*, enriching themselves by plundering its spoils. The fact that the boulder was replaced by other shepherds gave Yaakov hope that a historic remedy would occur. In fact, the Persians did allow the Jews to rebuild the second *mikdash* after the Babylonians burnt it down.

Second, the spring carried another positive association. Providence leading Yaakov to water suggested successful, thriving marriages. Yaakov recalled that matchmaker Eliezer had met Rivkah at a well and brought her to Yitzchak. Shlomoh *haMelech* drew upon spring imagery when speaking about a wife.[10] The three flocks alluded to the three patriarchs. Seemingly each one took their respective wives from a common, Charan reservoir. Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah all hailed from a shared lineage. The rock cover's

7. *Ramban*
8. *Bereshit Rabbah* ibid.
9. Ibid. 9
10. *Mishlei* 5:15

barrier to the water source signaled matriarchal infertility. Intense prayer by each patriarch, in turn, removed that heavy boulder, only to find it stubbornly returned for the next generation. Yaakov rolled the rock off as he saw Rachel, symbolizing that he would share children with her.

When Yaakov approached the spring, he opened conversation with the local shepherds. 'And Yaakov said to them: "Brothers, where are you from?"' They answered: 'We are from Charan.' Yaakov continued: 'Do you know Nachor's son Lavan?' Still wary, the shepherds curtly answered: 'We know [him].' Trying to draw them out, Yaakov asked an open-ended question. 'How is Lavan doing?' They shed discretion. 'He is fine.' Pointing out an approaching young woman, they added: 'That is his daughter Rachel bringing his flock.'

Accepting Rivkah's advice, Yaakov had sought out Lavan. Yaakov referred to Lavan as Nachor's son, when in fact Lavan was Betuel's son and Nachor's grandson, since the patriarchal figure of that family branch was Nachor, Avraham's brother. Lavan proudly hailed from distinguished stock.

Yaakov asked if things were okay with Lavan to determine whether his household dynamics were peaceful. Traumatized by his own turbulent home life, Yaakov saw no point spending time with a conflict-laden Lavan. He had had more than his fill of family feuds. Yaakov's concerns quieted after learning about Lavan's tranquil household in addition to setting eyes, from afar, on beautiful Rachel. Undoubtedly, he had long anticipated meeting his *bascherte*. An Eliezer-type premonition presaged that Rachel would be his bride. As she approached a watering trough, Yaakov struck up more conversation with the shepherds. That is when he learned about their water protection system and heavy well stopper.

Cousins Yaakov and Rachel walked towards each other. 'And Yaakov approached and he rolled the rock off the well. He watered his mother's brother Lavan's flock.' Curiously, the verse does not mention that Yaakov returned to cover the well's surface. Likely other shepherds were now tending their flocks and would replace the cover when they finished. On a deeper level recall that Yaakov associated the rock with matriarchal sterility. Possibly, Yaakov purposely kept the rock barrier off in order to symbolically effect a change regarding future Jewish fertility. In fact, the patriarch's suggestive behavior brought relief. Despite Yaakov's twelve sons assuredly marrying women from Nachor's fertility-challenged family, barrenness did not plague those wives.

The Torah relates a warm family greeting. 'And Yaakov kissed Rachel. His voice broke and he cried.' Perhaps sensing the maiden's discomfort, Yaakov reassured her that the gesture was platonic, reserved for close relatives as he and Lavan indeed were. But why the tears?

In comparison to Eliezer's earlier arrival laden with gifts and jewelry, Yaakov showed up empty. How he ached to shower Rachel with presents, adorn her with ornaments! Granted, Hashem did appear to him on Mt. Moriah promising hope, still the facts on the ground remained unchanged. He had been turned out of his own home penniless. Unlike Eliezer's visit amidst an atmosphere of warmth, ease and grace, Yaakov's arrival dragged with heavy, tragic baggage.

The Sages[11] understood that Rivkah had sent Yaakov off with gifts and presents but Elifaz stole everything. Elifaz was Esav's son and had been ordered to murder Yaakov. This had been forestalled because the young man had retained a whit of his grandfather Yitzchak's conscience. He sufficed with stealing, allowing Yaakov to escape with his life.

After Rachel and Yaakov's acquaintance 'she ran and told her father.' Puzzled that Rachel did not run to her mother, some commentators[12] suggest that her mother had died. Alternatively, Rachel thought Lavan should be told first since the two men were related. Rivkah, on the other hand, first told her mother because she wanted to show off the jewelry Eliezer had just given her.

Lavan learned that his nephew Yaakov arrived in town. 'And when Lavan heard about Yaakov, his sister's son, he ran to greet him. And he hugged him and he kissed him.' Lavan was genuinely excited to meet his sister's son – destitute and all. He warmly held on to his nephew, bringing Yaakov into his house; 'he told him everything.' That is, Yaakov confided his precarious position to Uncle Lavan, including the harrowing events leading up to it. Lavan learned of his sister's stealth, Yaakov's benediction snatch, and Esav's hatred and violent streak.

His uncle said all the right things. 'And Lavan said to him: "You are my flesh and blood." And he dwelled with him a month's time.' When Yaakov revealed the firstborn and blessing episodes, Lavan openly sided with him. Despite both young men being Lavan's nephews, he ruled in favor of Yaakov.

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11. See *Rashi* to 29:11
12. *Rashi*

Considering Yaakov 'flesh and blood' he pledged: should anyone lay a finger on you it is as if they are starting up with me. Yaakov sighed with more relief.

Other commentators[13] find fault with Lavan's response to Yaakov. Avarice-hardened Lavan displayed no sympathy for Yaakov's desperate plight since he came with no fat checkbook. Had he not been family, Lavan would not have let him through the front door.

Month number one serving as Lavan's ranch-hand passed quickly. Lavan clearly liked Yaakov's work ethic. 'And Lavan said to Yaakov: "You are family and you (need not) work for free. Name your salary."' Lavan did not ask Yaakov about local custom and going wages. This he knew. Lavan wanted to hear Yaakov's price. The patriarch explained that he had known wealth and comfort in his father and grandfather's home. He was no migrant worker.

'And Lavan had two daughters. The older one's name was Leah and the younger one Rachel. Leah's eyes lacked vigor, while Rachel was beautiful and attractive.' Yaakov was about to tell Lavan that any future labor arrangement was not about money.

Third *aliyah*

'And Yaakov loved Rachel. He said: "I will work seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter."'

Nonchalant about material possessions and in no rush to return home, Yaakov needed the basics – a wife and a roof. He unambiguously spelled out that he intended to work without salary in order to marry Rachel. Yaakov loved Rachel and quibbling over his payment never entered into the discussion. He did not only choose Rachel because of her looks, though she was strikingly beautiful. Yaakov had more in common with Rachel than Leah because of their respective family positioning. Both were the younger ones in sibling order and placement. Also, Yaakov sensed a natural bond with her when she first appeared at the well, a place filled with good vibrations. Lastly, Yaakov passed on Leah because her eyes lacked fire, appearing dull. The patriarch feared that this would be a harbinger of eye disorders such as those that afflicted Yitzchak.

Yaakov's choice presented Lavan with a touchy situation, to say the least. If the uncle pushed too hard for Yaakov to reconsider and marry Leah, then

13. *Rashi*

he risked alienating Yaakov altogether, perhaps causing him to bolt. Lavan mulled his options before purposely misleading his sister's son. 'And Lavan said: "Better that I give her to you than to someone else. Stay with me."' Lavan calculated that eventually Rachel would marry someone who would never provide him with seven free years of labor. Note that Lavan never actually said "I agree." His words simply amounted to an obvious observation. Wanting to appear fair-minded, Lavan even insisted that Yaakov receive an unspecified salary (which in Lavan's mind was Leah). It was a win-win. Yaakov walked away with what he wanted and Lavan benefited too. Only one dangling detail needed attention. How to bamboozle Leah into the deal?

For seven years, Yaakov labored and toiled for his boss Lavan. With unflagging dedication, he shepherded his uncle's flocks for what might have seemed an eternity – had it not been that his beloved Rachel was on the other side of the septennium. In his eyes, it was a boon – a scant seven years for such a special, young woman. To this lovestruck patriarch, it barely registered as a blip in time relative to the spousal joy he envisioned.

At the end of the term, Yaakov approached Lavan requesting to 'bring now my bride so I can marry and settle down with her.' He told Lavan, in essence, that seven years had passed and he was entitled to make a home with Rachel. Lavan had different ideas.

'And Lavan gathered all of the place's people and made a wedding.' At the last moment, no-qualms Lavan replaced bride Rachel with Leah. Cunningly, he sprung a snare. Lavan planned the sting perfectly, including details that totally threw Yaakov off guard. For example, to help celebrate the wedding Lavan invited the entire town. Later by contrast, when Lavan celebrated Rachel's marriage, the affair was scant. Lavan figured that Yaakov would lose face before all of the townspeople if he were to realize that the waiting bride was none other than Leah and divorce her forthwith. Had they all not dined and drank toasts together? Done the hora? Lavan had no such fears when it came to Rachel, so in her case he shaved the wedding expenses to a caterers' nightmare proportions – no banquet, no guests. No band. Also, Lavan used his two daughters' handmaids to further dull and entrap Yaakov. Traditionally, the older handmaid Bilhah attended the older sister Leah, while younger Zilpah served Rachel, the younger daughter.[14] But that night, after the bridegroom

14. *Bereshit Rabbah* 71:9

Yaakov consummated the marriage he left the chamber where Leah had been attended by Zilpah. Lavan switched handmaids so that Yaakov saw Zilpah entering the darkened honeymoon suite. Director Lavan staged a tight scene.

Modest and reticent with women, Yaakov did not know he had intimate marital relations with Leah until the morning light. Taking Lavan aside, Yaakov fumed. 'And he said to Lavan: "*WHAT DID YOU DO TO ME? I WORKED FOR RACHEL! WHY DID YOU DECEIVE ME?*"' Yaakov stared openmouthed as Lavan spouted some *narishkeit* chicanery amounting to claims that he had only been blandly theorizing about his preference to keeping Rachel in the family versus marrying a stranger. In Lavan's mind, marriage anyway was subject to local custom. Lavan chided the newcomer nephew. 'Lavan said: "In our place it is not done to marry the younger one before the older one."' Surely, Yaakov, you understood that Leah was part of the package.

Of course, the point was moot. It simply did not matter because Lavan delivered a *fait accompli*. Garble aside, Lavan apparently preferred Yaakov to marry both his daughters as he laid out his plan. 'At the end of one week of wedding celebrations (for Leah), also this one will be given to you in exchange for your working seven more years for me.' Lavan told Yaakov that he was willing to advance Rachel to his son-in-law while working off the second round.

Sensing Heaven's hand in marrying two pious sisters, Yaakov accepted. 'And he set up home with Rachel, loving Rachel more because of Leah. And he worked with him for seven additional years.' The Torah records a sequence of events. Leah had her bridal center stage for the week. After Leah and Yaakov's seven-day festivities concluded, Lavan quietly married Rachel to Yaakov. The patriarch set up two homes and went back to work presumably after the week-long marriage celebrations with Rachel.

Yaakov's preference of Rachel persisted despite his physical intimacy with Leah. Ancient thinkers taught that love or infatuation with somebody dissipates after that love-struck individual shares intimacy with somebody else. But Yaakov's love for Rachel did not diminish even after his marriage to Leah. Atypically, it solidified it. An analysis reveals that Yaakov's love had two aspects. One, Yaakov's high regard for Rachel had to do with her exemplary personality and two, in comparison with Leah, Rachel's distinctive qualities towered.

Generally, it is frustrating to pay for something after having received it. Yaakov's case differed in that living with Rachel rendered his work obligations to Lavan an easy burden to bear.

§§§

The discussion turns now to a fundamental point. Readers need to make sense of Yaakov's marriage to two women, let alone sisters. *Sefer Vayikra* explicitly prohibits simultaneous marriage to two sisters.[15]

Three perspectives elucidate the patriarch's rationale. First, to be sure, Yaakov had not contemplated polygamy. The narrative could not be clearer that Yaakov desired to marry only Rachel and he said as much to Lavan. However, Hashem saw matters differently and Lavan's underhandedness, not coincidentally, dovetailed with Heaven's thinking. The Almighty recognized that Rachel, Yaakov's *bascherte*, was infertile. Later in the *parashah*, we read that only Divine Providence helped her conceive twice. Still, dynasties do not flourish that way. Recall that in the ladder prophecy, Hashem promised 'and your seed will be like the dust of the earth, bursting west, east, north and south.' With Rachel's impaired reproductive system, Yaakov's seed would not wax populous, certainly not in his lifetime. No seventy adult descendants going down to Egypt. The more than four hundred family members[16] who surrounded his death bed would have been impossible.

Had Hashem not tampered with Yaakov's original monogamous designs then the third patriarch would have followed his father's and grandfather's snail's pace. Nature's path would, at best, land him a modest, nuclear-sized family. On the other hand, by marrying several wives, a throwback to ante-diluvian style, the fulfillment of the grander scheme stood a good chance. Recall, in Noach's time men typically practiced polygamy. With the urgency of populating a renewed world, common practice even sanctioned men marrying sisters. This was precisely what happened with Adam and Chavah's sons, who according to tradition[17] married twin sisters. With Yaakov, that model resurfaced with a slight twist in order to soften Yaakov's personal situation. That is, in usual circumstances if a man practices polygamy, competing wives likely spell a recipe for domestic nightmare. Marrying sisters, as Yaakov did,

15. *Vayikra* 18:18
16. Abravanel's source for this figure is unclear.
17. *Bereshit Rabbah* 22:2

fostered better chances for family harmony. Added to his two main wives were their respective handmaidens Bilhah and Zilpah (secondary wives). They could be relied upon to recognize their status and transmit that attitude to their offspring, completing a unified family dynamic. Yaakov was fairly positioned to see the prolificacy aspect of the ladder-prophecy realized in his lifetime. Later in this narrative the Torah will describe sibling jealousy in regards to Yosef,[18] but that was largely attributable to Yosef's teenage peccadillo. Despite it all, the brothers ended up humbly submitting to Yosef and Yaakov witnessed a firmly fused family before he passed on. In summary, while Yaakov intended to marry one wife, Hashem rearranged things in order to exponentially expand the patriarch's family.

Secondly, Divine plan had matched Rivkah's two sons to wed brother Lavan's two daughters. According to tradition elder Esav would marry elder Leah; younger Yaakov matched with younger Rachel.[19] The Heavenly Judge saw Yaakov's dual-family positioning. That is, since Yaakov had purchased the firstborn rights, he replaced Esav in that top position. At the same time, Yaakov's natural birth order was that of the younger brother. As an implicit Divine nod to Yaakov's double role, Hashem set a scene whereby he would marry both upright sisters. Despite marriage to sisters assuming an unorthodox flavor, Heaven decreed it. Interestingly, Leah gave birth to six children, equal to the balance of the twelve tribes, in keeping with her status as the firstborn's wife.

The Almighty showered Yaakov with unlimited favor and compassion. Avraham could not hold on to two sons born of two mothers. His concubines' children were also banished. Yitzchak fared even worse – twins of the same mother drifted very far apart. All of Yaakov's twelve sons, four mothers' offspring, bonded together in Hashem's service. The Almighty had promised in Beer Sheva 'Behold I am with you.' Providence aplenty – every step of the way.

If the second reason was mystical, then this third and last explanation for Yaakov marrying two sisters and two handmaidens ranked symbolic. Hashem depicted Yaakov as a microcosm. How? In Heaven, Hashem is flanked, in a manner of speaking, by four *malach* encampments. Themes of four assume form in Yechezkel's fiery chariot prophecy.[20] The number four represents the

18. See chapter nine, first *aliyah*
19. *Bereshit Rabbah* 70:16
20. See *Yechezkel* 1

natural world's four elements, seasons, life-forms (inanimate, plant, animal, human), and Gentile political dynasties that would subjugate the Jews.

Yaakov married four wives because Hashem viewed him as the patriarch best-suited to forge twelve cohesive tribes from twelve sons. The Jewish desert trek formation was marked by twelve tribes neatly divided into four camp banners occupying the four quadrants surrounding the *mishcan*. Yaakov's four wives and twelve sons were thus the fulfillment of the ladder dream blessing: 'And your seed will be like the dust of the earth, bursting west, east, north, and south.'[21]

§§§

As with the matriarchs Sarah and Rivkah, Rachel could not conceive. 'And Hashem saw that Leah was hated and opened her womb. Rachel was sterile.' Leah was also born sterile and only direct Divine intervention fixed matters. The verse clearly states that Providence promptly altered the situation in order to immediately improve Leah's standing. Beloved Rachel's secure position, at this point, did not beckon Divine herculean measures.

The four matriarchs' barrenness pattern conveys much about the Jewish People. That is, the Jewish Persona – from inauguration to culmination – is marked by supernatural Providence. Had the flow of events been allowed to take nature's course, these four wives would not have contributed children to the nation.

Leah, it appeared, conceived shortly after her marriage. Unlike Rachel who proactively prayed for children, Leah didn't. Hashem, observing the icy spousal dynamics between Yaakov and Leah, preempted Leah's words. Presumably, Leah would have otherwise remained childless longer, as was the case with Rachel.

Alternatively, Rachel might not have been barren, but Hashem hindered her fertility because she failed to take appropriate religious initiative. Rachel could and should have done more to engender a rapprochement between her husband and sister. Her moral lapse resulted in Divinely-imposed barrenness.

Regarding Leah, the Torah writes hate. Hate is, of course, a strong word. When brought to the fore, the feeling can be expressed in actions or words. In the extreme, abhorrence affects acerbic behavior and speech. Yaakov's

21. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*

acrimony, sadly, measured extreme. Rarely did he spend time with Leah and when, by chance, they got together, only recrimination resulted. Poisoned best defined the fleetingly little overlap and interaction the couple shared.

Then Leah's children arrived. 'And Leah conceived and bore a son and she called his name Reuven, saying: "The Almighty has seen my torment. Now my husband will love me."' Leah prayed for a different and better environment after Yaakov became a first-time father. Specifically, she hoped for an improvement in Yaakov's *behavior*. As an indication of their marital toxicity, Leah aimed low. Apparently things had been so uncivil she did not contemplate *verbal/emotional* progress. Shimon's birth set a higher bar and allowed for entertaining positive marital goals. 'And she conceived and bore a son, saying: "Hashem *heard* I was hated and gave me also this one." She called his name Shimon.' Clearly, Leah experienced an incremental amelioration of her status after Reuven was born. Shimon's birth removed her feeling of being unwanted. Love, however, is not the absence of hate. Deep-seated malice shed its skin gradually, in ticks.

'And she conceived again and bore a son, saying: "This time my husband will bond with me because I bore him three sons." Therefore he called his name Levi.' For the very first time, Leah felt Yaakov's engagement. Security and attachment took three pregnancies, deliveries and dedicated parenting, but come it did. Undisputedly in this family case study, children cemented a congruous couplehood. Admiration, respect, and love rid disdain's venom, ultimately galvanizing a solid relationship. Resentment over past duplicity faded, disappeared. Leah hoped that Yaakov would realize that he had surpassed earlier patriarchs regarding the number of sons he fathered. In sum, three sons raised Yaakov's attitude toward Leah from contempt to compassion. Levi was the first son Yaakov named, underscoring a fundamental change in outlook. It may be that Levi's birth accomplished something more modest. Perhaps it only served to eradicate the fringe vestiges of hatred in Yaakov's heart. That would be enough to engender normal spousal interactions.

The Sages[22] maintained that, as discussed earlier, Yaakov beheld four wives and twelve sons in the ladder dream prophecy, divided into four segments of three. Leah's third son, mathematically speaking, filled her quota.

22. *Tanchuma* Vayetze 9

Rapid and consecutive births took their toll. Pregnancies and rearing toddlers physically hurt and exhausted her. Leah's goal of getting together with Yaakov was accomplished. Son number four, to put it mildly, overwhelmed her. 'And she conceived again and bore a son saying, "This time I'll thank Hashem." Therefore she called his name Yehudah and she stopped bearing.' Seemingly at wit's end, Leah desperately pleaded for Divine mercy to curtail her fertility and unpunctuated deliveries. Hashem shut down her uterus, picking up on an ungrateful undertone.

In naming her four sons, Leah consistently used Hashem's Four-Letter Name, connoting His mercy, in recognition of Hashem's kindness in orchestrating the end of her harrowing hatred ordeal. These four sons were bonus boys. From here on in, each wife would bear two sons only.

Watching her sister's family growing by leaps and bounds, Rachel's personal satisfaction skidded. Acute jealousy undermined her marriage. To Yaakov, she griped. 'Give me children. Otherwise I am (as good as) dead.' In trying to elicit Yaakov's heartfelt prayers, Rachel intimated Yitzchak's initial barren plight and subsequent supplications to heaven. Surely your own father petitioned on behalf of your mother Rivkah to conceive, Rachel railed. The matriarch felt her plight profoundly and knew that without children she would not contribute to her husband's Israel inheritance. She also foresaw herself engulfed in her spiraling wretched anguish. Down and out despair nearly destroyed her.

Yaakov dismissed the comparisons, accusing Rachel of not taking responsibility. He differentiated his parents' case because both had been reproductively challenged and that was why both offered fervent prayers. Not so here. He vociferously deflected Rachel's plea, asserting her need to take charge. Specifically, Yaakov encouraged her to indulge in some intense self-introspection and meditative reflection. Here, Yaakov used the Hashem's Name *Elohim*, connoting justice, because he was confident that, for whatever reason, Rachel's troubles were just.

No verbal response to Yaakov's rebuke is recorded, but Rachel's actions fill the verse's gap. Resourcefully, she continued to look at Yaakov's family behavior pattern for guidance. Reflecting on childless Sarah's remedy, Rachel urged Yaakov to marry a third wife. 'And she said, "Here is my handmaiden

Bilhah. Marry her. When she bears children I, too, will benefit from surrogacy."' It worked.

Consenting to Rachel's solution had nothing remotely to do with an interest in more wives. Yaakov was not sexually obsessed. Rather he desired to satisfy Rachel. The handmaiden conceived and had two sons – Dan and Naftali. Rachel's name choices revealed how the matriarch internalized Yaakov's constructive criticism. Rachel attributed her infertility to her own shortcomings – her lack of personal prayer and especially her callousness towards Leah. 'The Almighty (*Elohim*) meted out justice (*danani*) [in withholding children] and also heeded my voice [and kindly granted some of my wishes: Bilhah's eldest son].' 'O Almighty Hashem, I was very obstinate (*niftalti*) with my sister Leah. I really got under her skin.'

The Torah marks each of these children as the 'sons of Yaakov' – not as inferior handmaids' children as with Yishmael.[23] Rachel's inclusion of Bilhah and her children in the holy family's nucleus goaded Leah, who had experienced secondary infertility. When Yaakov married Leah's handmaiden Zilpah, the last missing piece of the heavenly depiction of the patriarch surrounded by four wives became complete. Leah may have also harbored regrets over allowing Zilpah to languish in solitary servant status, attributing her secondary barrenness to that misstep.

Leah called Zilpah's first son Gad. '*Mazal* (*gad*) has returned' with the birth of a son under Leah's aegis. Recall that Lavan had given Zilpah (the younger handmaiden) to Leah in order to fool Yaakov. Leah dubbing Zilpah's oldest son "Gad" may have been hidden allusion to her father's treachery (*bagad*).

Leah named the second boy Asher. 'Since I gladdened (*b'oshri*) Zilpah, I was praised by other girls'. Fellow females could not help but be impressed with Leah's altruism and magnanimity in allowing for more potential co-wife competition. Indeed, Leah went far beyond the call of duty in order to remove Zilpah's stigma as an accomplice to Lavan's wiles.

23. Chapter four, fifth *aliyah*

Fourth *aliyah*

'And Reuven went out during the wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field. He brought them to his mother Leah. Rachel requested of Leah: "Please give me your son's mandrakes."'

The Torah records a revealing twist regarding the children's births, featuring Yaakov's oldest son Reuven picking mandrakes. Likely this plant, shaped like a person's head and hands, was thought to enhance fertility. Reuven knew that his mother Leah sought to conceive and harmlessly brought her a bouquet of mandrakes, unwittingly setting off a display of crackling fireworks between the sisters.

When Rachel asked for them, Leah snapped indignantly. 'She said: "Is it insignificant that you took my husband? Now you (want to) take my son's mandrakes?" And Rachel said: "Then he (Yaakov) spends tonight with you in exchange for your son's mandrakes."'

Very possibly, Yaakov lodged mostly with Rachel, seeing that Leah had stopped having children. Rachel still had not conceived. Leah, on the other hand, hoped for more marital intimacy so that she might yet bear additional children. Rachel added insult to injury by requesting her mandrakes, seeking to become pregnant before Leah's second round of children.

Rachel exchanged Yaakov's company for Leah's mandrakes. Leah intercepted her husband on his way home from work to inform him that she had prepared supper at her place. 'When Yaakov returned from the field that evening Leah went to greet him saying: "You will come to me tonight, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes."' Yaakov learned about the sisters' tradeoff. That night, Leah conceived. She later gave birth to her fifth son Yissachar 'because the Almighty (*Elohim*) has given me just reward for giving my handmaid to Yaakov.' The sixth son Zevulun was not long in coming. Leah knew she had captured half of the four tribal flags: 'Hashem has granted me a great portion. Now my husband will build a home with me (*yizbeleni*) for I have borne him six sons.' Note that Leah only totaled her sons' number at the births of number three Levi and sixth Yissachar, where full flags had been accounted for.

For Leah and her six sons, smugness supplanted satisfaction. Leah believed she had merited (some of) them on Rachel's account and at her expense. Tellingly, Leah called the family's only daughter "Dinah" – alluding to Divine justice and

punishment, foreboding the next *parashah's* tragedy and suffering.[24] Leah's hubris may have unwittingly contributed to sowing the seeds for her daughter's abduction. Alternatively, Leah may have recognized that Dinah's birth and Shechem plight resulted from her own wedding night duplicity and culpability.

In fact, Leah had not sealed shut Rachel's fertility. The Torah tells that 'Hashem remembered Rachel and heard her prayers.' Yaakov's first love became a matriarch. 'Hashem opened Rachel's womb and she had a son.' A pained chapter closed when Rachel bore Yosef. Expressing appreciation and relief Rachel acknowledged 'Hashem dissipated (*asaf*) my (barren) humiliation.' Rachel's name choice for her son expressed feelings with an eye on the future. She yearned for a second son to achieve parity with the handmaidens who, recall, had two sons each. She prayed: 'Hashem. Add (*yosef*) an additional son to me!' In sum, Leah's prolificacy had not stopped Rachel's reproduction. Rather she had worked through her personal issues enabling her participation in a rapidly evolving Jewish nationhood.

For Yaakov, Yosef's arrival represented exile's closure. He believed that this son, born of his primary spouse, assumed the position as the rightful repository of the blessings he received from Yitzchak. The Sages[25] understood that Yosef, and later his descendants, personified the role of family defender against Esav's slings and arrows, cannon shots, epic wars.

Soon after Yosef's birth, Yaakov approached Lavan with a request. 'And Yaakov said to Lavan: "Release me and I will return to my place and to my land."' In anticipation, Yaakov readied himself for Lavan's objection grounded on a weak premise that he never contemplated allowing his daughters to marry and leave Charan. The matter had not been discussed and certainly not stipulated. Yaakov's methodical logic pointed out to Lavan how he toiled for his wives and children. He emphasized his father-in-law's wealth, or better, Yaakov's value-added contribution to that wealth. Revenue accrued 'due to my back-breaking labor with which I served you.' Stressing the spectacular enhanced appreciation of Lavan's net worth since he began his stewardship, Yaakov went for broke. He wanted out and he wanted his fair share of profits. At the very least, minimal *mentschlichkeit* dictated a sizeable dowry from Lavan for his departing daughters.

24. See chapter eight, fifth *aliyah*
25. *Bereshit Rabbah* 73:7

Shrewd Lavan read Yaakov's negotiation tactics and stopped him cold. 'And Lavan said to him: "If I now find favor with you, I will divine that Hashem has blessed me on account of you."' In essence, Lavan proposed to test Yaakov's mighty presumption. Guardedly, Lavan conceded one thing – his fabulous opulence. The reason for his wealth could be determined simply enough. If Yaakov remained in Lavan's employment, then the blessing was in Yaakov's merit. But if Yaakov departed, then it was Lavan's own good fortune. The test of course made no sense, but that is what made it Lavan-level, scoundrel-scale "divining."

Fifth *aliyah*

'And he (Lavan) said: "Name your wages and I will pay them."'

Czar Lavan held all the chips and therefore controlled, per se, the game. In short shrift, Yaakov deduced that, in this plantation overseer's mind, fourteen years of labor meant absolutely nothing. What a contrast to Yaakov's meticulous positioning that had demanded not only retroactive salary but also a bonus package reflecting his exemplary dedication. Lavan was not impressed. No back pay, certainly no bonus.

Lavan prodded Yaakov to move forward and submit his future monthly and yearly wage propositions. The patriarch may very well have experienced a sinking feeling as he contemplated fourteen years of hard work with no savings to show for it. Yaakov threw the hard facts in Lavan's face. "*You don't need any further proof. Put this in your parsimonious pipe and smoke it*: 'You know how long I worked for you. You know how many cattle heads you had when I took over. You had close to nothing and it grew exponentially. Hashem blessed you on my account."' Fed up, Yaakov asked: 'And when will I work for my household?' "*I'm not getting any younger, you know. If I spend too many more years working for you, when do I get to start my own business?*"

Lavan answered a question with a question. 'And he said: "What should I give you?"' Lavan cried uncle on both points. Yaakov deserved some green, back pay. Regarding Yaakov's future farmhand status, Lavan would not press the issue. His nephew had a right to self-employment.

Yaakov was gratified to hear that his father-in-law recognized his being in the right, and enthusiastically went the whole nine yards in his uncle's favor. 'Don't give me anything' for the past. And for the next few years, 'If you do the

following, I'll go back to pasturing and guarding your flock.' One thing though. Yaakov was no valley fruit picker getting paid by the kilo, hour, or any other time-linked formula. He had to get paid for the job. Working the fields round the clock in all weather conditions was a responsible position, fully deserving of an appropriate managerial pay scale. 'I will inspect all of your flocks. You go and remove the spotted and speckled and brown sheep, along with the spotted and speckled goats, for my salary.' Yaakov thought of an excellent way to differentiate the livestock by color and markings. A breach got flagged, for example, in the event that Lavan found a solid white sheep among Yaakov's brown ones. Yaakov was entitled to keep his marked, identifiable sheep and goats. Scheming Lavan imagined himself laughing all the way to the bank. He jumped at the terms. 'Yes! I wish this deal were done already!' For Yaakov's ears, the phrase read: 'Oh yes. I truly hope it works out as you wish…'

Lavan rigged the herd. 'On that day he (Lavan) separated all his white sheep and goats that were speckled and spotted, as well as all his brown ones, and deposited them with his sons.' Nothing left for Yaakov here… Chances were that a pure white flock would beget the same, and Yaakov would be left with slim pickins, if anything at all.

Lavan next made sure that his snow white herds would never even catch a glimpse of the speckled sheep and company, let alone mate with them. A three-day journey separated the two herds, precluding any contact. When Yaakov caught on to Lavan's *schtick*, he resourcefully devised countermeasures. Designed to replace Lavan's absconded sheep and goats, Yaakov concocted speckled and spotted sticks by peeling away some of their bark. He placed these next to watering troughs, where sheep in heat are often found. The simulative stick colors had a suggestive effect, with the flocks imagining each other to be spotted. It seems that Yaakov only used these techniques temporarily in order to repair the injurious effects of Lavan's dastardly petard. Lavan could have earmarked his own spotted, speckled and brown flocks instead of putting them out of sight and facilitating Yaakov's pittance pay.

At this point, Yaakov's ploy stimulated a very limited effect. But he had another trick up his sleeve. Yaakov isolated the few spotted, speckled and brown sheep he engineered. The mottled flock always ran ahead of Lavan's white sheep, engendering an effect similar to, but more powerful than, the stick simulation exercise. Yaakov did not allow the different types to mingle

so Lavan would not bust a vein over the dappled sheep fraternizing with his white ones, generating too many stippled flocks.

Yaakov was more than fair with Lavan. Stronger sheep were less susceptible to stick simulation stimuli, whereas the weaker ones were very suggestible in this regard. Yaakov only placed sticks in front of *stronger* ones in self-imposed restraint. Had he so chosen, he could have cleaned Lavan out.[26] Alternatively,[27] Yaakov only placed sticks before the sheep in the beginning of *Nisan*, when the stronger sheep were in heat, and not in *Tishrei*, when the weaker sheep mated. Yaakov then kept the stronger sheep for himself. Either way, Yaakov did all this clandestinely. None of the shepherds, let alone Lavan, noticed a thing.

Yaakov's flocks grew remarkably. Moreover, his methods engineered a superior and buoyant breed. In summary, Yaakov's stick *schtick* was justified on four counts:

- This was a way for Yaakov to stake a claim on his justified retroactive wages for the past fourteen years.
- It was a belated but customary dowry transfer from Lavan to his son-in-law.
- The present labor contract stipulated these terms. Yaakov would be entitled to the pre-designated flocks.
- Since Lavan's subterfuge in spacing the flocks put Yaakov at a distinct disadvantage, the patriarch extemporized to assure a fairer outcome.

While the patriarch had right on his side, his growing and conspicuous wealth did not bode well when dealing with pull-no-stops, avaricious Lavan. There would be a showdown. Soon recriminations by Lavan's sons started rolling. 'And Yaakov heard Lavan's sons' accusations saying: "Yaakov has taken everything that belonged to our father. With our father's (property), he has attained this prestige."' Yaakov had attempted to forestall family jealousies by reducing his asset visibility. Bartering excess flocks in exchange for other chattel – human and animal – failed to produce the desired results. Lavan's sons still bristled when they encountered an ever-growing retinue of servants, maidservants and camels. Yaakov understood that these jejune sentiments were not to be ignored. They were picked up around Lavan's family's dinner table.[28]

26. This is *Ramban*'s interpretation.
27. Ibn Ezra
28. Cf. BT *Succah* 56b

The tensions mounted until Yaakov observed: 'Lately, Lavan cannot even act civilly towards me.' Yaakov's family received the brunt of Lavan's blatant silent treatment, passive aggression. His stony face was an open book with disdain scribbled snidely on every page's marginalia.

The acrimonious in-law relations continued to derail, when Hashem intervened. 'And Hashem said to Yaakov: "Return to the land of your fathers and your birthplace. I will be with you."' Finally, prophecy promoted exit plans as it promised a safe passage home. This underscored Yaakov's fear of Lavan stonewalling his departure or worse. When the Divine assurance to Yaakov 'I will be with you' was uttered, it meant more than a nicety; it was a lifesaver. The Divine promise included protection from Esav, as well.

While the Torah does not explicitly write that the requisite six-year labor term concluded, this should be manifest. Yaakov did not abandon Lavan's sheep, since at this point he was his own man. Readers can handily calculate Yaakov's sojourn with Lavan. A twenty year breakdown included working seven years for Rachel, seven for Leah and the final six years as pay for serving as Lavan's overseer.

The Divine directive to leave Lavan was explicit. Yaakov heard that he should not spend another day in the scoundrel's company. The risk-laden plan called for the utmost discretion. Clandestine arrangements took place some distance from the small-town's prying big ears. Yaakov chose an inconspicuous grazing pasture for a family rendezvous. 'And Yaakov sent and called for Rachel and Leah. (They met him) in his flock's field.' Yaakov related how things had become unbearably strained between him and their father. Family affection disappeared. Fortunately, Hashem had watched over him so far but it was only a matter of time before Lavan made more malicious moves. Furthermore, they heard Yaakov's assessment that the animosity had nothing to do with him. The patriarch's dedication and service had been unwavering. On top of everything, he had put up with countless breaches of contract. Lavan switched flocks from speckled to spotted, freckled to dotted, dimpled to dappled and stippled to mottled. And back round and round again. Although the Torah did not previously spell this out, it definitely happened, since Yaakov later charged Lavan with this sort of deception to his face.[29] Vivid heavenly dreams advised the patriarch how to overcome this manipulator's machinations. Otherwise, he continued,

29. Sixth *aliyah* below

they would be penniless. Yaakov did not mention Lavan's sons' disparagement reasoning that his wives would dismiss their grumblings as puerile pouting.

Rachel and Leah also learned that the ladder prophecy and promise of success had been his beacon and tower of strength. Drawing to a close, Yaakov wrapped up a retelling of the Divine communiqué. 'I am the Almighty [of] Beit El where you anointed an altar. It is where you vowed to Me an oath. Now arise and leave this land. Return to your homeland.'

Rachel and Leah's reactions came spontaneously. Their pent-up anger barreled out and with it streamed the sentiments that had welled up over two decades. The sisters did not mince words about how it felt to be shamelessly mistreated by their father. His house held nothing for them.

Not money: 'Do we have an inheritance or portion in our father's household?'

Not sentiment: 'We are like strangers to him. He sold us!'

Yaakov heard how the daughters felt to be treated like cheap commodities, no more than traded trinkets. They continued, venting the years of abuse that began when the two were turned out of their home without even the common decency of a loving father's dowry. Nor did they doubt Yaakov's integrity in amassing his wealth: 'All the wealth which the Divine Judge salvaged really belongs to us.' With relief, Rachel and Leah entertained leaving their father's clenched-fist grip. Liberated. Direct and to the point, both wives concluded: 'Now, do everything Hashem told you.'

Sixth *aliyah*

'And Yaakov arose,
taking his sons and his wives on the camels.'

When Yaakov saw that his wives were determined to depart, he loaded up his belongings. Certainly in the patriarch's mind, he was entitled to everything he had earned and would not abandon it. His deliberate pace showed, furthermore, composure. Yaakov's calculation to leave coincided with Lavan's trip to shear his sheep, since it likely entailed a protracted celebration. Any head start would be desirable – especially in the event of a future confrontation. Yaakov avoided a fight on Lavan's home turf.

Packing up a burgeoning family had been fairly tedious though Rachel's decision to swipe her father's *teraphim* came, so to speak, out of the blue.

Lavan's superstitious and pagan belief system included all sorts of primitive behavior, not least of which utilized artifacts called *teraphim*. Why would Rachel smuggle them, especially considering the fact that Yaakov's monotheism could not be more averse to such mumbo jumbo? It can be ruled out that Rachel wanted these *teraphim* for her own use and needs. To be sure, the patriarchs and matriarchs did not indulge in mindless vanities. Plausibly, she surmised that soothsayer Lavan had some past successes with *teraphim*. Of course dolls, like all inanimate objects, could not talk but they did serve as some sort of transcendental meditation tool. Rachel did not want to risk Lavan's perceived inspiration or divination from the figurines.

Upon returning from the shearing celebration, Lavan sought out his *teraphim* and found them missing. At the end of the *aliyah*, we will see that this proved to be a flashpoint with Yaakov. Lavan, the consummate con man went berserk when he discovered that his son-in-law pulled the wool over his eyes and left town unexpectedly.

Yaakov's hasty exit shocked and infuriated Lavan for any of three reasons, depending on how one reads the verse describing Lavan's predicament:

- 'Yaakov deceived Lavan by not telling him, because he was running away.' Yaakov observed the pall over Lavan and his sons' faces towards him, but he kept the information to himself and never let on that something was terribly amiss.
- 'Yaakov messed with Lavan's mind so that it gave him no clue that Yaakov was running away.' Lavan prided himself on intrigue. Now, the table was turned. He was livid to find out that his wily antennae failed to detect Yaakov's plan.
- 'Yaakov flimflammed Lavan by not telling him that he was a fugitive.' When Yaakov first arrived in Padan Aram from Israel, he never divulged that he had fled from Esav. Yaakov only spoke to Lavan in general terms telling him that bad sibling blood had, for the time being, made separation preferable. Yaakov did not disclose to Lavan his ability to leave town stealthily, as he had done when escaping Esav. This facet of Yaakov's logistic brilliance caught Lavan off guard.

Advantageously Yaakov's family got off to a seven-day lead when Lavan's posse pursued and caught up. The calculation runs like this: on Yaakov's third day on the road, Lavan learned of the escape. He returned to Charan on the fourth

day to enlist help from family and friends. Setting off with a vengeance, Lavan's galloping band made Yaakov's seven day pace in three days. That summarizes how the confrontation occurred on Yaakov's seventh day out of Charan.

Hashem intervened by communicating with Lavan before the two captains met. Recall[30] that though Hashem's communication is generally most discreet and discerning, on occasion exceptions occur. Lavan's Heavenly dream message is an apt example. 'And Hashem came to Lavan in a night dream saying to him: "Watch yourself from speaking with Yaakov from good to bad."' Lavan got lectured against using two types of criticism. Type One begins positively and concludes negatively. For example, Hashem warned Lavan against starting with his professed love for Yaakov and concluding with his intention to challenge him to a fight on account of kidnapping and stealing. Type Two's order is reversed. Hashem permitted Lavan to begin with criticism for acting inappropriately as long as words of affection and conciliation concluded the chastisement. Thus this thug's admonition of Yaakov had to be limited to that type which concluded on a bright note. Lavan's wording would, in fact, follow that format.

Heaven nixed Lavan's battle plans before the adversaries locked horns. When the long-anticipated showdown occurred, strangely, it looked more like a typical family send-off and empressement than a clash of powerful personalities. Lavan's jealousy over Yaakov's fantabulous wealth distorted his reasoning, causing him to hunt down his daughters and grandchildren as if they had committed grand felonies. Something deeper piqued Lavan. Enviously he observed Yaakov's flock increase well beyond natural growth trends and suspected foul play. The problem was that no clues or hard evidence ever surfaced. This whetted Lavan's frustrations.

Ironically, Lavan's funk lifted when he heard about Yaakov's disappearance. Finally, Lavan thought, he would overtake him and discover Yaakov's secret to success. Riding up to Yaakov, he grilled him: 'And Lavan said to Yaakov: "What did you do?"' What underhanded method did you devise to get all these flocks? Someone must have seen you do whatever it is you do and that is why you had to hightail out of Aram...

'You dashed my heart and you rode off with my daughters as if they were mercenaries' captives.' Why was there no grandstand sendoff? Lavan

30. See e.g. chapter three, sixth *aliyah*; chapter four, fourth *aliyah*

elaborated on both of these charges. 'Why did you escape stealthily?' First, he smarted over Yaakov's sly egress that deprived him of proper bon voyage blessings. Second, he resented not being able to hug and kiss his grandchildren and daughters goodbye. Both complaints fished, essentially, for the whopper. Namely, Lavan demanded Yaakov come clean of all wrongdoing. He fully expected to conduct a lengthy confessional. Lavan tried to prompt Yaakov with open questions – 'Have you suddenly acted foolishly?' *You're a very smart fellow, Yaakov. Saying that you were stricken with sudden thoughtlessness will not cut it…*

This self-appointed sheriff's second gripe took a different aim. 'I have the right to punish you but your fathers' Almighty One spoke to me yesterday saying: "Watch yourself from speaking good or bad with Yaakov."' Lavan insinuated that Hashem knew well of Yaakov's alleged malfeasance and stood by ready to punish him for all damages. Contorted logic drew a ludicrous conclusion: Yaakov had been culpable but Hashem stayed Lavan's hand from striking the patriarch.

Lavan could not resist, it seems, tacking on yet a third infringement on Yaakov's contrived charge sheet. 'And now you surely left out of deep desire to return to your father's household. Why did you steal my god?' *I know what you're going to say. You got homesick like little boys do. Okay, you didn't want to be stopped.* Lavan accused Yaakov of pilfering the "telltale" *teraphim* so that they would not uncover Yaakov's misdeeds. Lavan correctly assessed that since Yaakov was upstanding he had no personal need for the puppets. Loads of threats and vacuous innuendos filled Lavan's interrogatories but landed Master Bluster exactly where he started. Nowhere.

Yaakov, if you will, stood for the defense. A composed patriarch finely shredded his father-in-law's specious charges, showing no anger or argumentativeness because the *teraphim* issue had thrown him for a loop. While he was secure in the knowledge of his own innocence, there were doubts regarding the kidnapping of Lavan's pet, pudgy cherub. Did a member of his group take it? 'And Yaakov answered saying to Lavan: "I feared you would steal your daughters from me."' Lavan heard that the patriarch had not gained anything illegally. Real concern persisted about parting with his daughters. Likely Lavan would take Rachel and Leah as if chattel, effectively stymying Yaakov. Note how Yaakov did not express a fear of Lavan stealing his grandchildren because

Yaakov certainly had a far stronger claim to them as their father. Yaakov also omitted mentioning Lavan's true design – the flocks – for fear that stating it in the open might somehow invite Lavan to snatch them.[31]

Should this alleged *teraphim* heist get uncovered, Yaakov needed to urge his followers away from any voodoo and primitive superstitious remnants. Additionally, Yaakov sent unmistakably strong signals to Lavan that the episode, if real, mortified him. He assured his father-in-law that he had no idea who, if anyone, had taken them. The patriarch stressed 'Whoever is found with your gods shall die.' The grave pronouncement and punishment undergirded the patriarch's moral system. In Yaakov's mind, and for educational purposes, he equated the *teraphim* theft with kidnapping. Both were punishable by death.[32] The Sages[33] explain that Yaakov cursed the offender with death by Divine hand since he was guilty of idolatry.

Yaakov did not know that Rachel had the *teraphim*. Had he known, he would not have cursed her but would have attributed the quirky affair to Rachel's honest, harmless intentions. The potency of Yaakov's excoriation likely contributed to her death.[34]

Incredulous that he failed to extract Yaakov's confession, Lavan consoled himself that a search among Yaakov's belongings would reveal the *teraphim*, and they would disclose what had thus far eluded him: *What made Yaakov run?* 'And Lavan went to Yaakov's tent, Leah's tent and the two handmaids' tents but found nothing. He left Leah's tent and came to Rachel's tent.' Lavan's groundless accusations were followed by wild goose chases. Except now, Yaakov was emboldened since Lavan's sniffing and snooping bagged *nada*. He now surmised that the *teraphim* had never been swiped. It was just a ruse to give Lavan something to jabber about when he caught up to Yaakov. Unamused, the patriarch dropped his tentative tone. He let Lavan have it.

'And Yaakov got furious and contended with Lavan. Yaakov responded and said to Lavan: "What is my offense?"' Yaakov exploded. He demanded to know the basis of the spurious malfeasance charges. Did Yaakov's record not speak for itself?

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31. Cf. BT *Berachot* 19a – 'Do not open Satan's mouth for him.' Apparently, there was no real fear of Lavan kidnapping his daughters, who did not care for him too much anyway.
32. *Shmot* 21:16
33. *Bereshit Rabbah* 74:9
34. See chapter eight, fifth *aliyah*

'What is my sin that wrought this reckless expedition after me?' Specifically Yaakov had three things in mind:

- If Lavan assumed that Yaakov had run off with his gold and silver, then why did his search not locate gobs of loot? The patriarch challenged his accuser to display all disputed "contraband" for public scrutiny.
- If Lavan intended to place Yaakov on trial for embezzlement – that too lacked substance. His labor stint ranked most impressive. 'Twenty years I have been with you. Did your ewes and goats ever lose offspring? Did I not eat from your flock's rams? Was there ever any prey killed by wild animals? Yet I never brought (dead offspring) carcasses before you.' Despite the customary practice exempting shepherds for animal injury and death, Yaakov paid up. 'I remunerated (you for the eaten sheep).' In light of the women and children's nourishment needs, it was customary for shepherds to feed their families with mutton. 'Losses (from wild animal kills), whether on day watch or night watch, I absorbed.' When the inevitable wolf, bear or lion attacks maimed or tore goats apart, Yaakov altruistically took full responsibility – even if that attack occurred in the middle of the night. Therefore 'sweltering day heat tortured me (and) frosted nights. My eyes forgot how to sleep.' Summing up his arguments, Yaakov concluded. Lavan is not owed anything. Yaakov had been victimized.
- Did this grand inquisitor believe that wage accounts still needed to be settled and closed? Preposterous! Yaakov continued ripping into Lavan's vacuous assertions by highlighting how he had labored fourteen years for Rachel and Leah and six more years for his flock. What did he get for his efforts? 'And you finagled with my wages ten times.' *If there are any gripes about wages, they aren't on your end, uncle…*

Yaakov's words informed Lavan, in short, that this rancher could not have been more above-board. Reliable work, conscientious scruples and mountains of patience – was something not clear to the boss? 'Had it not been for my father's Almighty, my grandfather's Almighty Protector and the dread of my father Yitzchak, you would have sent me away empty-handed. Hashem has seen my affliction and my toil, reproving you last night.' A bogus witch hunt had come for one end – to steal Yaakov's property. Moral compunction

had nothing to do with Lavan aborting his aims. Warned, Heaven's dream handcuffed the charlatan's gnarled, grubby paws.

Yaakov considered why he had merited Divine intervention. Reflecting on the *akedah*, the patriarch's intuition attributed his saving grace to Yitzchak's dread when he beheld Avraham's poised, raised knife. A second thing held Yaakov in good stead. Honest work. The patriarch had given his employer the utmost.

Seventh *aliyah*

'And Lavan answered and said to Yaakov: 'These daughters are my daughters and these children are my children and these herds are my herds. And all that you see belongs to me...'

Impervious, Lavan was not remotely ruffled. If anything, the conflict seemed to excite him. 'And Lavan answered and said to Yaakov: "Your women are my daughters. And the boys are my boys. The flocks are mine."' Pointing to Yaakov's vast holdings, brandishing his shepherd's crook like a dagger, Lavan rasped excitedly. 'Everything that you see is all mine.' A smug, histrionic, and arrogant player strutted self-righteousness and self-indignation. Feigning concern for the family whom he fathered, reared, coddled and loved Lavan said he could not bear to take back everything leaving them hungry, thirsty, destitute.

Knowing how to drive a bargain, the consummate wheeler-dealer opened bidding. 'And now let you and me cut a deal and it shall serve as testimony between us.' Lavan named his terms after concluding that Hashem would never allow him to defeat a pious patriarch. 'And Yaakov took a rock and lifted it for a monument.' He had in mind the type of structure built after he woke up from his ladder vision. Next to it, he directed his sons and fellow travelers to put together a rock pile. 'They ate on top of the mound' to capture a sense of family, fraternity. Friends customarily ate on the same table.

Acknowledging a bond, 'Lavan called it Yegar-Sahaduta ("The mound is a witness")' His Aramaic words were echoed and translated by Yaakov's Hebrew: 'And Yaakov called it Gal-ed.' Using a separate name for the heap, Lavan called it 'the *mitzpah* (lookout), saying that Hashem would observe our activities when we are out of each other's sight.'

Lavan's covenantal demands of Yaakov were: 'If you afflict my daughters or if you marry additional women – though no man is with us – see that

Hashem is witness between us.' Observing that Yaakov married his daughters' handmaidens Lavan foreswore him from taking additional wives. Besides personal matters, Lavan sued for a mutual defense pact. Specifically should one of the two be attacked or face difficulties, the other must assist. 'If I do not cross to you or if you do not pass to me, then this memorial witnesses (our) wrongdoing.'

Lavan invoked heavenly witnesses to forestall future breaches or at least arbitrate alleged ones. 'And Avraham's Almighty One (for Yaakov's side) and Nachor's god (for Lavan's side) shall judge between us (as they are) our forefather's heavenly ones.' Yaakov, unwilling to give their respective grandfathers religious parity, amended things. 'And Yaakov made an oath by his father Yitzchak's (*akedah*) fright.'

Yaakov hosted a gala repast after which 'they slept on the mountain.' Out of deference to his father-in-law, Yaakov called Lavan's sons and friends to sit and eat. It would not have been respectful to invite Lavan directly. Yaakov meant to suggest that the elder man oversaw the event. The meal's ambience was marked with great mutual affection. In the morning departing with kisses for his daughters and grandchildren, Lavan returned home.

Continuing on his journey home, Yaakov was greeted by an accompanying contingent of *malachim*. Suffering for two decades under Lavan's hardships had effectively stifled Yaakov's ability to achieve higher-level prophecy. The moment Lavan & co. disappeared over the horizon, the patriarch regained his composure and strength. 'And Yaakov walked along his way. Hashem's *malachim* greeted him. When Yaakov saw them, he declared: "This is a Divine camp!"' He recognized the *malachim* from his ladder dream, apprehending them via prophecy experienced through his senses.[35] 'He called the place Machanayim (two camps)' since now his own camp was joined by an angelic one.

35. See chapter four, first *aliyah*

CHAPTER EIGHT

PARASHAT VAYISHLACH

A HURT HOME

First *aliyah*

'And Yaakov sent malachim ahead to Esav his brother (residing) in the Land of Seir, field of Edom.'

Yaakov did not know that his road home was a collision course with advancing Esav. Had he known, Yaakov certainly would have taken a detour. Yaakov was approaching a proverbial hornet's nest. Recall that last *parashah's* conclusion taught that Hashem's *malachim* greeted, surrounded and, in effect, huddled around the returning patriarch. Leaving Lavan and Charan was, indeed, most salubrious.

Malachim in this context can refer to heavenly facilitators (supernatural) or human delivery men (natural). The supernatural option suggests that Yaakov had a vision whereby he saw Hashem's *malachim*. Without issuing a word, the Almighty enabled Yaakov to review a heavenly-stationed troop formation. The patriarch, after reflection, understood the Divine message. This peculiar format insinuated that something sinister neared. For Yaakov traveling home to the unknown, an S.O.S. code wailed. As if deciphering dots and dashes, he read: **LION'S-DEN-AHEAD-ESAV-CROUCHING-PREPARED-TO-POUNCE.**

Alternatively, *malachim* intimates something more straightforward. Yaakov had chanced upon a group of wayfarers who apprised him of Esav's proximity. Either way – supernatural or natural – Yaakov attributed the cautionary tidings to Divine Providence.

Quickly, Yaakov began working on a plan. The patriarch dispatched intelligence agents, doubling as ambassadors, to Esav. His big brother had established a comfortable, solid, established and substantial Edom power base. He assumed leadership as Seir's regional commander. The diplomats

were charged with pre-summit meeting preparations. Yaakov estimated that informing Esav of his homecoming, eager to present himself as the chieftain's brother, could be a major political *faux pas*. In Esav's eyes, his little brother had been a refugee and relegated to a stranger's homeless plight. A hobo status is a humiliating stigma. That impoverished itinerant impression and image needed tidying up.

Pithily, Yaakov deflected his brother's misconceptions. 'I have dwelled with Lavan.' He had lived with good ol' Uncle Lavan. Esav was certainly proud of his kinship with that Aramean powerbroker – on par with living with Yitzchak. Esav heard that honor and prestige accrued to his brother during his long absence. Family takes care of its own. Yaakov had been admirably set up in one spot and did not ramble from town to town eating moldy *laffa* on park benches.

The messengers were drilled to tell how Yaakov rose rapidly through the business ranks before landing an executive position in a thriving and lucrative ranching establishment. His big brother need not concern himself about Yaakov knocking on the door for a handout. Mr. Entrepreneur had returned flush with a bulging financial portfolio. The prepared text said: 'I amassed cattle, donkeys, flocks, servants and handmaids. I send it to inform you, my master, for the purpose of finding pleasure in your eyes.' *Esav, roll out the red carpet. When I pull up for the Mt. Seir summit meetings in my Arabian-pulled chariot, you'll want to be ready.*

Yaakov's pre-plan took Esav's possible antagonistic intentions into account as well. Spy activity would be necessary if the messengers came to Seir and discovered that Esav was not at home, but headed north to spring a nasty greeting on returning Yaakov. If that happened, diplomacy was to be shelved. Any proactive attempt at normalcy would be interpreted as Yaakov's cowardice and weakness. Flattering sworn enemies accomplishes nothing. As far as exchanging gifts – out of the question. Why contribute to his war chest? The emissaries were to turn around and debrief Yaakov. It spelled impending war.

Analyzing the opening salutation in Yaakov's diplomatic communiqué in this light, he told the messengers 'Say this to my master Esav: "So says your servant Yaakov."' Yaakov hammered home that their mission was not to weep and grovel before Esav, relaying fear. Yaakov wanted his agents to sense and

convey that the goodwill gestures, if circumstances allowed, were a younger brother's natural deference.

Soon after the men rode out of Yaakov's encampment, they spotted Esav and his rough riders. 'And the messengers returned to Yaakov saying: "We came to your brother, Esav, and he too approaches with four hundred men."' Clear instructions precluded them from speaking to Esav under the circumstances.

A second approach to the same verses vastly veers from the first. Accordingly this plan called for casting Yaakov to appear as Esav's subordinate. It sought to paint Yaakov as weak and ill-prepared to even remotely consider dueling with Esav. After a twenty year hiatus, the patriarch only desired to calm and placate Esav if, in fact, he still bristled regarding the firstborn blessings. This line of interpretation indicates that Yaakov actually sent his messengers to scout and search for Esav whose territory did not intersect with Yaakov's road home. Under different circumstances, Yaakov would have wanted to directly appeal to Esav. He stayed back to assist his wives and children. This proactive planning further stipulated that in the event that the messengers were intercepted by Esav's men, 'Say this: "To my master Esav!"' They were advised to identify themselves either as Esav's servants, ready and willing to do his bidding, or couriers on behalf of another for the benefit of Seir's boss. Failure to make the appropriate announcement could jeopardize their lives considering that Esav's band had little regard for human life.

The forefather struck a groveling pose that downplayed his material wealth. 'So says your servant Yaakov. "I dwelled with Lavan and dallied there until now. I put together an ox, a donkey, some sheep, a servant, a maidservant."' The messengers conveyed that Yaakov hardly eked out a modest living. The firstborn blessing did not serve to strew Yaakov's path with easy sacks of silver. Alas, he had toiled for a score of strenuous years under Uncle Lavan. In fact the whole time was, monetarily, a bust. How pathetic to return home after twenty years with no more than a modest and measly few heads of cattle! One sad lackluster career. Yitzchak's blessings were manifestly ineffective in the areas that mattered to Esav most.

Both approaches can find support in the fact that Torah uses the singular when listing Yaakov's assets (ox, donkey, slave, etc.). Did Yaakov return with one bull or is the verse listing a general heading for an entire asset class?

Leeway allows the commentaries to explore opposing tactics. Yaakov either predicated a portrait of parity with Esav or alternatively emphasized how Yitzchak's blessings for prosperity never materialized.

Parenthetically, Yaakov insinuated that there were limits to his sycophancy. Fear did not motivate Yaakov's stay with Lavan. If Esav had truly intimidated and scared Yaakov, lodging with Lavan lacked logic because both brothers had identical access and entree to their uncle. Searching for a wife as per parental suggestion brought him to Charan.

'I send it to inform you, my master, for the purpose of finding pleasure in your eyes.' Yaakov surveyed the past years as lean years with hardly any fungibles to show for it. This emphasized that Yitzchak's blessing landed merely as a dud, amounting to *efes*. Since Yaakov's negligible net worth amounted to beans, so to speak, Esav should not take offense at the whole blessing caper. A few scrawny beasts represented decades of backbreaking labor's smallish salary and savings.

Since the patriarch's scouts were never informed about the old-standing family issues, they could be of no help. The agents were in the dark as to just how deep Esav's animosity ran. When they met Esav on the road, they read their text flawlessly. Esav cryptically replied: "I'm on my way to him." Their report to Yaakov read: 'We came to *your brother* Esav, and he is coming to *greet* you with an entourage of four hundred men!' The messengers' blissful ignorance struck a farcical chord, thinking that this brotherly reunion would be emotional and teary. The patriarch knew the players better.

'Yaakov feared greatly and was much agitated.' Four hundred soldiers in Class A uniforms were no military parade band. Yaakov heard loud warpath drumming. With the dough boys on the move, Yaakov went from planning exigencies to the situation room. Loose-cannon Esav would be within reach soon.

§§§

Why was the patriarch stressed? Is faith compatible with fear? If Yaakov believed in the prophetic promises of security and well-being, what is meant by his inner turmoil that indicated existential anxiety? Clearly Yaakov's reaction to his messenger's information requires understanding.

Presuming that the patriarchs had lack of faith resounds preposterous, broadly missing the point. Hashem's favorable promises are unalterable,

unimpeachable. An impending armed conflict assumes a different dynamic, especially for its commander. Naturally and expectedly Yaakov experienced battlefield's rush, danger, confusion, fear. At that moment, however, the patriarch's faith rallied him. Quintessential mind over matter, he swallowed his fear precisely because of confidence in Hashem's companionship.

Ancient thinkers put it this way. A man who goes to war cocksure of his invincibility is an imbecile. Foolish headlong charges expose his self-delusion. Heroism does not mean ignoring war's ravage, pain or death's prospect. Instead, heroes confront death and mortality *despite* its intensity. Honesty and honor drive a soldier's courage forward.

Yaakov exemplified these qualities. He did not fear Esav nor did he dwell on death. Certainly the patriarch harbored no illusions that Heaven's promises guaranteed that Esav would behave brotherly, burying the hatchet. Rose-tinted assessments are downright silly. Rather, Yaakov coldly assessed his opponent's ruthless intentions to kill indiscriminately. Adrenalin lifted him. His initial apprehension gripped as the horde's battle screams grew louder, closer. Switching mental gears he subdued, and ultimately dismissed the paralyzing sentimentality. The patriarch went to battle, girded with a sense of right. Divine promises shadowed him in marching lockstep.

Religious resolve ought to be perceived as follows. It is axiomatic that Torah alone provides the antidote to human complexities and frailties. Ideally in times of conflict, human impulses and natural drives do not play a decisive part in determining modes of thought, speech or behavior. Eternal truths enlighten and ennoble, neutralizing what is commonly referred to as the human condition. An example illustrates. When a healthy, virile and robust man comes into the presence of a beautiful woman whom the Torah forbids, the disciplined individual wrestles, tames, and subdues his human urges. This best defines and marks self-mastery. To paraphrase the Sages[1]: One should not delude himself to say about a coveted person or thing that he does not desire it. Rather one should muster the inner grit to overcome temptation by reasoning that he does want the thing. But what can he do – the Torah forbids it. An analogous behavior is found with patients in need of some horrid medicine with steamroller side-effects. They marshal up the courage, and take their lumps, knowing that the alternative is worse.

1. Sifra *Vayikra* 20:26

Encountering Esav presented Yaakov with religious life's duality: the bodily fear of war and rational belief in the Almighty's promises. Had faith not ruled Yaakov's psyche, he would have attempted self-preservation by fleeing or mad-dashing to the closest walled city. Either escape would have been joined by an urgent letter to Yitzchak begging for Esav's withdrawal.

Nothing of the sort. 'And he slept there on that night.' Here lay composure, relegating Esav to the proper proportion and confident of prophecy's promise. On the eve of Esav's reunion, note that while Hashem did initially broadcast a graphic Divinely-coded S.O.S. Heavenly verbal reassurances were not necessary.

Spurning indolence, Yaakov blazoned Jewish expedience in times of impending calamity: *Miracle at Work*. No reliance on wonders without due diligence. The verses attest how he bore down.

'And he divided his accompanying people, flocks, herds and camels into two groups. If Esav would come to the first one and strike it then the second one would survive.'[2] The first group consisted of half of his servants and livestock. The second camp had been separated by a safe distance from the first one and included his wives and children. Another clever aspect had to do with the placement of the family across the Yabok River. This assumed an attack on the first river bank by the aggressor. Fording the river at night had not, logistically speaking, been simple. Still, logic predicated Regiment A fighting formidably enough to deter the belligerents from entertaining a second attack on the weaker one comprised of women and children. The plan considered that if Esav struck for the purposes of plunder, then he might leave satisfied with taking the servants and animals. Perhaps he would think that was all Yaakov had. Yaakov's family would be kept intact, along with half his original possessions. At any rate, even taking into consideration Esav's determination to continue attacking, distancing the family plus a river barrier separation made escape feasible.

Of course, Commander Yaakov's assumption could terribly backfire in the event that Esav's choice of approach surprised him. The family's position so far behind the front-line defenders and isolated weighed heavy on his heart. This second form of readiness necessitated a tactic that did not have to do with army drills or military matters, per se. He pleaded.

2. To better clarify the following passage, a map has been included at the end of this volume.

'And Yaakov said: "Hashem of my father Avraham and of my father Yitzchak, Divine Almighty Who told me to return home and that I will be with you."' Divine Providence kept a watchful eye over the patriarch in this tense encounter. Notwithstanding Yaakov's forethought, Esav's troops stormed right into the family encampment. Esav had set his sights beyond plunder and booty. Needless to say even solid planning can, on occasion, fail. However Hashem's hand guides human history and the Divine plan one-upped Yaakov's desired result. Both of the patriarch's encampments survived unmolested and ultimately rejoined. Once again,[3] Hashem enrolled a forefather in Solomon's seminar: 'The heart of man bears many a thought, but the Almighty's counsel shall ever be wrought.'[4]

Prayer had served as one of Yaakov's main resorts. Tellingly, the verse does not describe, strictly speaking, Yaakov's words as prayer. Instead of saying that he prayed, cried out or beseeched it only conveys what Yaakov said.

Yaakov's body gave off signs of fear and he pep-talked to himself with faith and reason, assuaging the gnawing physical sensations. He told himself that Hashem had his back. But Yaakov wanted Hashem to listen in on an intimate monologue. Invoking the illustrious patriarchs Avraham and Yitzchak, the patriarch first appealed to heavenly justice. 'Almighty of (*Elohei*) my father Avraham and my father Yitzchak.' His illustrious predecessors had toiled too long and hard to see their work destroyed now.

'(Merciful) Hashem Who told me: "Return home and I will shower you with good."' Yaakov recalled Hashem's promise when he fled Lavan.[5] Although Hashem had actually said, 'I will be with you,' Yaakov understandably interpreted that as "I will shower you with good." Yaakov reasoned that those words could not have referred to material success. Humbly, Yaakov confessed that Hashem had already provided much more than was warranted. 'I am unworthy of all the kindnesses and fair-mindedness which You have done for Your servant.' The closed conversation spelled out specifics. 'With a shepherd's rod I traversed the Yarden and now I fill two encampments.' Yaakov articulated what he would consider the fulfillment of Aram's promise: 'Please save me from my brother, Esav. I fear he will come and strike the women and children.'

3. See chapter three, second *aliyah*
4. *Mishlei* 19:21
5. Chapter seven, fifth *aliyah*

Alternatively, the end of Yaakov's prayer/psyche session reads slightly differently. 'Now I fill two encampments' – I have divided everything I have in this world into two camps. I cannot ask that You save both, but 'please save me from my brother Esav.' Stop him from entering the main camp, 'for I am fearful for it. He might come and kill me since I will protect my family as a human shield.' The patriarch paraphrased the ladder vision's promise. 'You said: "I will bestow the greatest good upon you. Your children will be innumerable as the sea's sand."'

In Yaakov's mind it made sense to draw on the more recent Heavenly promise relayed in Charan than the earlier one expressed and communicated through the ladder dream, since the later promises were less likely to have already been granted and fulfilled. Also note that Yaakov left out some parts of the ladder message in toto. He figured that the promises of 'I [Hashem] will not forsake you until I have done that which I have promised to you' had possibly already been attained since he had already entered Canaan's borders.

Second *aliyah*

'And he slept there on that night, taking a gift for Esav his brother from among his property.'

As mentioned in the previous *aliyah* Yaakov unswervingly anticipated Hashem's protection. He did not beat a quick retreat to the closest walled city or hastily construct a sand-bagged trench. Additionally, Yaakov expected a Divine answer to his supplications. He assumed it would come in a night vision or dream. Sleep, therefore, would best facilitate the Divine communication's reception. Nothing came. Perhaps Heaven's boycott echoed a criticism regarding Yaakov sending emissaries to Esav - let alone his obsequiousness. Atypically unceremonious and bitingly sardonic regarding Esav, the Sages[6] advocated letting sleeping dogs lie. Bidding his messengers to sign off 'Yaakov, Esav's servant' smelled of toadying. Another possible implied criticism centers on Yaakov dividing his encampment. This intimates tactical overemphasis and exposed his shortcomings regarding his trust in the Almighty's ability to salvage everything, as indeed occurred. Hashem also wanted Yaakov to proceed with a final tactic: Yaakov had deemed it appropriate to send gifts to

6. *Bereshit Rabbah* 75:3

Esav. Perhaps valuables would buy off his big brother in the eleventh hour. The prophetic vision would come the following night.

'He took from whatever came to hand to present a tribute to Esav his brother.' The showing and sharing of wealth ought to have pleased and impressed Esav. Perhaps Yaakov intended to complete his restitution for the firstborn rights purchased years ago from his brother for a modest lentil-pot down payment. 'And he took from what he had readily available to present to Esav his brother.' The tenor of Yaakov's offering, though measured, attempted to relay the proper honor towards Esav in his capacity as Mt. Seir's leader in addition to being the elder sibling. Understating the gift, Yaakov stressed that he should have lavished him with more expensive and exotic largesse. He "put a little something" together.

The Torah itemizes the gift: 'Two hundred female goats, twenty rams, two hundred female sheep and twenty male ones, thirty female camels and their young, forty cows and ten bulls. Twenty female donkeys and ten males.' Yaakov attached an itemized list so Esav might enshrine and segregate those herds from his own as a constant reminder of his brother's benevolence. He also banked on Esav's gift modeling an annuity, producing male and female offspring. Hopefully each new head would cement and bond the brothers. 'And he said to his servants: "Pass before me and place a distance between each of the flocks."' Promotional eye appeal motivated Yaakov to keep the herds well-spaced, fostering an ongoing opulent feel.

'And he commanded the first one saying: "If Esav my brother intercepts you and asks you who you are, or where you are going, or to whom these items belong, then you shall say that it belongs to Yaakov your servant. It is a gift to my master Esav. In fact there is more of it coming up."' Rather than foreseeing Esav peppering the emissaries with rapid fire questions, Yaakov prepped them with a pool of queries to expect. The patriarch kept their answer short and succinct. Regardless of what Esav asked, a one-liner sufficed: 'It is a gift to my master Esav. In fact there is more of it coming up.' Yaakov's prepared script tiptoed through explosive sibling rivalry minefields. Ad-libbed mistakes might torpedo the goodwill gestures. Meticulously drilled, each platoon sergeant knew his lines. Sticking to the gist was okay, too. But veering from it was out of the question.

Yaakov's gift bearers' instructions were explicit, but conditional. The delivery men were directed to read a prepared speech only in the event that they were approached and questioned, as this signaled Esav's peaceful overtures. However, if Esav ignored them, they must not recite their lines since the absence of communication revealed restless agitation. Hashem's protection could be counted on to blunt an enemy's punch. As things turned out, the vengeful brother never inquired, and hence the heightened tensions as Yaakov contemplated war's inevitability.

In the event of a stony silence on Esav's part, the lead contingent was directed to respond in kind and pass by since their primary mission was to set the tone for tribute acceptance. Barring that, successive messengers were instructed to state 'Your servant Yaakov is right behind us too.' There was no mention of the gifts in that case. Fearless Yaakov is coming down. Plausibly, Yaakov had counted on Esav's attack and his messengers utilized psychology to chill the enemy's blood by intimidation. While the patriarch extended a hand in peace he firmly planted his feet in case of war.

The Torah explains the strategy's rationale. If Esav initiated conversation that would signal his interest in the gift, and in that case Yaakov wanted Esav to keep it because he thought 'I will appease him with the gift that goes before me.' If Esav marched on, though, then war was afoot. If so 'I'll face his wrath. But maybe he'll face mine.' Cocksure Esav might very well lose with Hashem fighting against Team Red.

An alternative explanation of this verse envisions Yaakov instructing the gift bearers to package the presents as a sin-offering, conveying Yaakov's contrition for not contacting his brother earlier. 'I will beg his forgiveness for not meeting him with this gift that precedes me. Afterwards I will see his face (in the hope) that he will agree to meet me now.' Yaakov implied that without the gifts, his failure to contact Esav for two decades was an appropriate cause for refusing to see Yaakov.

A different read of this difficult passage is as follows. Recall that Yaakov's original reconnaissance scouts were instructed to determine Esav's intention based on his location. Esav at home in Seir boded well. Esav galloping northbound was bad news. Yaakov received word that Esav was on his way, but his older brother was of course unaware of Yaakov's spy ring in the field. At this point, Yaakov was of no mind to openly placate Esav in response to his

explicit war overtures. Yaakov was not interested in shivering displays of abject terror. On the other hand, if he were to innocently feign that his tribute was to Esav *dwelling in Seir*, his gesture could not possibly be taken as motivated by fear. Esav would view it as brotherly love. The gift-giving gendarmes were therefore instructed to make believe they had no idea that it was Esav on the road when they met up with him. As far as they were concerned, Esav was ensconced in his Seir citadel. Yaakov surmised that Esav would not resist asking about the flowing flocks, and further interrogate the guides as to who they were and where they were headed. They were to respond: 'It is a gift sent to my master Esav.' This phrase was not in the deferential third person – they were to make a show of not realizing they were talking to the head honcho. 'Your servant Yaakov' is a courteous expression to any leader of men. In the event of Esav's single-minded murderous rage preventing him from asking about the delegation, they were to initiate conversation. 'Say this when you find him.'

Yaakov added a key point. 'And you should say (again) "Your servant Yaakov is right behind us too."' The gift bearers were instructed to pay close attention to Esav's face. If it went from its usual heavy rosé to brick red, it meant Esav was taken aback by Yaakov's upcoming surprise visit.[7]

Yaakov had the tribute train go up ahead a bit. He planned to meet Esav right after the grand presentation so its effect would not have time to wear off. He first prepared for the night ahead. The patriarch would pass the night with his family.

Recall that Yaakov divvied up his property in two, with his family joining a camp in a position that was less likely to be the direction of Esav's arrival – across the River Yabok. With the retreat, Yaakov alone gauged the water's depth. If he deemed it shallow enough, he would assist his wives' and children's river-crossing.

'And he forded the Yabok Pass.' River conditions permitted. One by one he carried over his family members. 'And he took them, bringing them across the river.' The same evacuation procedure was repeated with the camp's movables except that Yaakov did not attend to it personally rather he commanded his porters to schlep them. 'And he directed the bringing over (of his property).'

7. The following phrase in the verse, 'I will beg his forgiveness…,' is read in accordance with the second option presented above.

What transpired next with the patriarch should be seen through two prisms of perspective. Namely, a) what happened, and b) what did it signify? The verse says that after moving the people and property, 'Yaakov remained alone.'[8] Picture the family protected on the river's safe side. Yaakov returned with his workers in order to oversee the transport of the camp's movables. In charge, Yaakov remained there until the last porters and vestiges of the camp had been evacuated. The Sages[9] understood that Yaakov made a sole, final inspection searching for "little items" that may have been overlooked. They meant that property, no matter how costly, shrunk in importance compared to the value he placed on human life.

The patriarch thus stood alone. At least the patriarch thought he was alone until he got jumped. A fight started. 'A man wrestled with him until daybreak.' There are two ways to win a wrestling match – strength or subterfuge. A more powerful opponent will throw his adversary to the ground with his arms. Less able ones will resort to lower limb tripping tactics.

Yaakov was more than a match for his opponent. 'And he (the opponent) saw that he could not overcome him.' Sizing up Yaakov's strength, the mugger realized the futility in continued conventional maneuvering with a tougher man. Practicing pathetic ploys, he nailed Yaakov's hip. 'And he struck his thigh joint.' A well-placed blow dislocated Yaakov's hip socket. The patriarch absorbed what would have decked others, dropping them to the mats in a heap of agony. Despite his crippling injuries, he reeled but never dropped. For that matter, crucially, he also did not let up or release the stranger. The beaten brawler could not break Yaakov's victorious vise-like grip.

The opponent sued for release. 'And he said: "Loosen your hold. Dawn breaks."' The attacker alluded to Yaakov that come daybreak another opponent – Esav – would attack. He had better conserve his remaining strength and energy. Allowing an inconclusive and vague outcome did not sit right for Yaakov. He had fought too long and too hard. 'And he said: "I will not release you until you bless me."' Blessing in the context of wrestlers is the admission of defeat. TKO.

'And he asked him: "What is your name?" And he answered: "Yaakov."' The attacker conceded he had been routed. 'And he said: "Do not say any longer

8. See the map at the end of this volume.
9. BT *Chullin* 91a

that your name is Yaakov. Your name is Yisrael."' He explained that Yaakov's name implies deceit (*ekev*). 'You have struggled with Hashem's *malach* and with men, defeating them.' The patriarch heard his adversary describe his inability to break loose from Yaakov's hold. Unlike the dirty fighter, the patriarch's sheer strength had been his road to victory, not underhandedness or trickery.

What did he allude to when acknowledging Yaakov's victories over *malachim* and men? The fighter revealed his true and perceived identities. That is, the patriarch overcame a *malach* appearing in a man's likeness. Alternatively, Yaakov's struggle with a *malach* referred to a night fight. His match against mortals had Esav in mind. Specifically Yaakov learned that Heaven had approved of wresting away his brother's firstborn blessing.

'And Yaakov inquired saying: "Please tell me your name."' Realizing that he had just defeated a celestial being and now had, so to speak, his ear, Yaakov pined to know more. What was his esteemed adversary's true nature? Did this *malach* serve as a compassionate or cruel heavenly agent?

The *malach* balked. 'And he asked: "Why do you ask my name?" He blessed him there.' The *malach* feared that the emboldened champion Yaakov demanded victory's sweet nectar – eternal servitude. He would agree to let the *malach* go on the condition that should Yaakov ever want or need a future favor, the vanquished wrestler would fulfill his whims. Celestial facilitators cannot chain themselves to man's beck and call. Indeed, Hashem created a world with a heavenly and earthly divide that, at best, interface sparingly. 'He blessed him there' – a one-time gesture. He then departed.

Alternatively,[10] the *malach* was telling Yaakov that the knowledge of his name was of no practical benefit. Only the Almighty has the power to save. He blessed Yaakov now since he was so commanded.

Before proceeding to the third *aliyah*, our discussion turns to a topic raised in *Parashat Vayera*.[11] Prophetic quality differs greatly. In the context of Yaakov's contest, what did the patriarch experience? Recall that by nature *malachim* are incorporeal. This renders physical fights impossible. If, however, the patriarch wrestled with himself or his alter-ego all night, what was the point? Moreover the following verses record that Yaakov limped. Presumably the patriarch still suffered from sustained sciatic injuries.

10. *Ramban*
11. See chapter four, first *aliyah*

Yaakov encountered his opponent while in a wakeful state of prophecy similar to Avraham's consciousness level when hosting and feeding the three *malachim*.[12] Hashem enabled Yaakov to virtually view and experience a wrestling meet. If asked, Yaakov would assert that he contested with a gruesome opponent. An objective bystander, perhaps, would see nothing other than intent Yaakov involved in virtual shadow-boxing. What explains Yaakov's limping? Likely that virtual prophetic experience aroused a physical participation of sorts. He may have wildly flailed his limbs, jerking them out of joint.

The Sages[13] suggest that Yaakov dueled with Esav's guardian *malach*. This needs to be understood because it is hardly possible that the ruddy ruffian or anyone else for that matter, warranted personal coaches in heaven, so to speak. Try to imagine the sheer quantity of such celestial supervisors! The Rabbis, instead, taught that each Gentile nation, including Edom, enjoys individualized protection and guardianship.

The match served an important function. It desensitized Yaakov to his subliminal fears of Esav, and thus empowered him. It offered the patriarch confidence enough to know that any struggle with Esav would result in Yaakov gaining the upper hand. By extension, Hashem watches over the patriarch's descendants. Yet the loss in terms of human sacrifice during the Jewish diaspora boggles the mind. In the epic Jewish-Christian rivalry, Esav's guardian proxy viciously rips Yaakov's thigh. This striking metaphor teaches that Yaakov's seed, referred to in *Tanach* as "thigh-product,"[14] gets hammered and mauled by Esav's descendants throughout the exile. Yet, Edom cannot nor will he triumph. The *malach* begged for Yaakov's release as dawn rose. Divine promise presaged a similar sentiment when history's final era dawns.[15] At that time, the nations of the world will inescapably validate Yaakov's purchase of Esav's firstborn rights – including Yitzchak's blessing. By Divine right, Avraham and Yitzchak's legacy passed through Yaakov. Undeniably these three forefathers had been designated conduits to forge a Chosen People.

12. Ibid.
13. *Bereshit Rabbah* 77:3
14. See *Shmot* 1:5
15. Cf. *Yeshayahu* 60:2

Third *aliyah*

'And Yaakov called the place Peni'el [saying] "for I have seen [Hashem's] malach in person and my life was saved."'

As discussed in the second *aliyah*, Yaakov's fight with the *malach* took place while he was awake. Unusual happenings and not weird dreams warrant place name changes. Two colossal events combined in naming this locale: The vivid bout itself, and the fact that it nearly killed Yaakov, leaving him badly mauled.

The extreme aftereffects also lend support in asserting Yaakov's wakeful state. 'And the sun shone upon him when he passed Penuel, limping.' His entire bruised body ached. A debilitating battering immobilized him altogether. Therapeutic sun rays then lifted his paralysis though a nasty limp remained.

Later when the Jews stood at Mt. Sinai, they were informed of another aspect of the contest etched for posterity. 'And therefore *Bnei* Yisrael do not eat the sciatic sinew (or "dislocated sinew") located on the hip joint to this very day. (It is) because he (the *malach*) damaged Yaakov's hip joint at the sciatic nerve.'

None of Yaakov's other prophecies occurred while alert. This one's content and message shook his entire being. Besides the physical assault that had endangered life and limb, viewing his descendants' harrowing Edom exile gave no respite. He hurt and knew precisely what lay in store for his progeny. Later, the prophet Michah saw it too.[16] He poignantly depicts a scarred, gimpy Jewish Nation hobbling home from the earth's four corners, eventually waxing prolific and under Hashem's soothing wing. An eerie end-of-days montage.

Little time remained for Yaakov to ponder his wounds let alone attend to them. 'And he lifted his eyes. He could make out Esav galloping towards him with four hundred men.'[17] As mentioned, Esav circumvented Company A, heading right for the family tents. For Yaakov's part, the Divine promises of survival and the fortuitous outcome of his wrestling match reassured him. Yaakov had no need whatsoever to brace for an attack, should Esav reach for his weapons. At that point the patriarch oversaw a welcoming wagon lineup that more resembled a family portrait. 'And he divided them according to Leah's children, Rachel and the two handmaids' children.' With dignified aplomb, he readied himself for a reunion.

16. *Michah* 4:6
17. See the map at the end of this volume.

Yaakov separated and distanced his wives and children as a way of interfering with Esav's gaze. It chopped up, per se, an otherwise panoramic and one-sweep blink of the family, which could arouse envious sentiments. This arrangement began with the handmaids and their sons. They had the dubious honor of greeting Esav after Yaakov had moved up to first, the main position to enable introductions. Next were Leah and her children by her side with Rachel and Yosef further down. Striding past them and bowing deferentially, 'he prostrated himself seven times as he approached his brother.' The moment arrived. Eyes locked.

Carefully observing his brother's dignity and submission, Esav dismounted. His walk turned to a sprint. 'And Esav ran towards him, hugging him. And he fell upon his (Yaakov's) neck, kissing him and they cried.' Both the gifts and seeing Yaakov bow created within Esav a farthing of goodwill. For a hiccup in time, he may have lost himself, wondering how twenty years had passed without a word exchanged.

Esav inspected the human chain before him. Still moved, he saw many women and children. 'He asked: "Are all these yours?"' Reflecting on the last time they were together, Esav recalled that his younger brother had been single. Fairly, Esav probably assumed that some of the women and children were his wives' relatives and assorted tag-alongs.

'And he answered: "These are my children whereby Hashem has graced your servant."' Yaakov never did answer about the women. He felt that it would open him up to ridicule. Esav's pristine image of his brother would not adjust to the present circumstances. Had Esav found out the truth he would have likely responded by lobbing ribald barbs over having married four women compared to Esav's three. Wishing to skip the whole complex story, Yaakov switched the subject to his children.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And the handmaids approached.
With their children they bowed down.'

The handmaids and the children approached first followed by Leah and their children. Yosef and Rachel trailed last.

Esav, recall, had not seen Yaakov's entire other encampment comprising an impressive array of opulence. He had encountered a smaller, respectable

amount of livestock intended as a gift, but noticing no other animals now[18] raised a legitimate question. Why would Yaakov squander his entire net worth on Esav, or for that matter, anyone else? Since Esav initially ignored the messengers, this is the first time things were being explained to him. 'And he asked: "What was that ensemble I met along the way?" And he answered, "To find favor in my master's eyes."'

Well-off Esav assured Yaakov that he was in no need of financial assistance. 'I have plenty. Brother, keep what is yours.' Yaakov did not want to cause a row or misunderstanding so he explained his motives. Of course the gift did not mean to imply that Esav was strapped for cash. 'Certainly not! If I have found pleasure in your eyes, then accept my present from my hand (seeing as you refused it from my gift bearers). Seeing you again is like a rendezvous with the Almighty. You [will] have graced *me*.' Yaakov compared this gift to a man offering a sacrifice. As with an altar, it had nothing to do with Heaven as a needy recipient. Absurd! Rather religiosity's sentiments are reflexive gestures; they benefit the giver. Esav's acceptance would confer upon the donor Yaakov respect and honor. Esav also need not worry about the gift blasting too sizeable a chunk out of Yaakov's portfolio. 'Please take my tribute since I brought it for you.' The gift's proportions and magnitude had been determined with forethought, from when Yaakov departed Charan. 'Hashem has graced me and I have more of everything.' Esav only accepted after a persistent entreaty from Yaakov.

Another reading of the segment views Esav in a jovial mood. 'I have a superior in my brother! Keep what is yours!' Esav ribbed that he could not *possibly* accept such a magnificent gift from his *far* more accomplished kid brother. Yaakov thought he picked up on some undercurrent of lingering bitterness over the Beer Sheva blessing fiasco. He therefore responded, 'Take my blessing which was meant for you, since I (regardless) have been graced by the Almighty and have all I need.'

Esav, heart aflutter with rekindled fraternal love, reciprocated a bid. 'And he said: "Let us travel together. I will walk with you."' Noting Yaakov's large and cumbersome group, Esav offered to accommodate. Wary Yaakov knew that his erratic brother could not be trusted. Experience taught Yaakov the hard way and he learned to suspect, so to speak, tripping over Esav's extended foot.

18. Abravanel does not mention what happend to this faction's livestock.

The patriarch declined his brother's offer. Citing logistics, Yaakov explained that his delicate group's needs required them to move at a snail's pace. Specifically he detailed his children's tender ages as well as the delicate condition of the pregnant and nursing livestock. Prodding the flocks along too quickly could prove fatal. 'Let my master pass before his servant…until I arrive to my master in Seir.'

Commentators are troubled by the patriarch's closing words to Esav. Did Yaakov deliberately lie when he promised to meet up again with his brother in Seir? No such visit gets mention in the Torah. Ascribing duplicity to Yaakov here certainly raises eyebrows. One creative approach utilizes a technique that scrambles the verse's words and reorders them. A reconstructed reading would be like this: 'Let my master (Esav) pass before me (Yaakov), his servant, to Seir. I, then, will slowly make my way to my father and true master Yitzchak.'

When Esav suggested leaving some of his men to show Yaakov the way and offer protection, Yaakov refused a second bid. 'Why? We get along!' Since peace between them had been achieved he would not be in need of Esav's sentries (no one else threatened murder!). 'And Esav returned on that day, making his way back to Seir.'

Giving an order, Yaakov's camp continued on their homeward march. 'And Yaakov traveled to Succot where he built a house and animal shelter. Therefore he called it Succot.' The magnitude of Yaakov's family and possessions precluded simple, spontaneous lodging solutions. Building houses and barns are, of course, major undertakings. The Torah writes these verses to teach about Yaakov's goodly traits. He readily recognized the inconvenience on hosts that his large family imposed. Not wanting to put others out, Yaakov practiced self-reliance. Erecting permanent structures, therefore, should not be misconstrued. The family had no intention of staying put. Naturally the locals were delighted to meet Yaakov and marveled at his noble demeanor, industry, and innovation, so they called the place "Succot."

Before moving on to discuss Yaakov's return home in detail, it is appropriate here to paraphrase the Sages'[19] words regarding the brothers' interchange. They closely analyzed Yaakov's posturing and attitude towards Esav and understood six points that defined and guided the Jewish experience throughout the Christian-period exile.

19. See the *Ramban* to the beginning of *Vayishlach*

Maaseh avot simman laBanim – the patriarchs were acutely aware of modeling their roles and inculcated guiding actions for posterity.

- *Fear*: Yaakov's intuitive fear and suspicion of Esav is ingrained.
- *Preparation*: Yaakov's readiness consisting of prayer, bribery, and battle is a fundamental survival blueprint.
- *Peace Overtures*: Yaakov's ingratiating initiatives sought irrelevant or fleeting appeasement. Second Temple era regents made similar mistakes in signing pacts with the Romans, ultimately bringing about their own downfall.[20]
- *Division*: Yaakov divided his personnel and property into two separate encampments. Throughout history martyrdom in one country is simultaneous with another land providing safe haven.
- *Decimation but Survival*: Esav's *malach* could not defeat Yaakov but badly injured him. Many would die at Edom's hands, but Jewish continuity is guaranteed.
- *Forbearance*: Following the summit meeting, Yaakov's protracted homebound journey contrasted with Esav's swift sojourn back to Seir. It teaches patience. Esav's descendants would establish a monarchy well before the Jews.[21] Long, bitter exiles precede eternal *geulah*. Ultimately, the Mountain of Esav will be judged by Yaakov's progeny.[22]

As Esav traveled to his homeland, Yaakov trekked onwards to his own. 'And Yaakov arrived in Shalem, Shechem [situated in the] Land of Canaan as he made his way from Padan Aram.' Yaakov crossed into Shechem State's northern border and pitched his tents in the city of Shalem en route home to Yitzchak living in distant Chevron. The City of Patriarchs lay just south of Shechem's southern state border. The *city* of Shechem (unrelated to the present narrative) lay within the state at its southern border, and shared the state's name.[23] This is also important for tracking Yosef's visit to his brothers (who

20. Perhaps the allusion here is to Hyrkanus and Aristobulus' appeal to Pompei to mediate their dispute, granting Roman boots entry to Judea. Abravanel however refers to *Chazal*, where the story does not explicitly appear. Cf. BT *Avodah Zarah* 8b
21. See seventh *aliyah* below
22. See *Ovadyah* 1:21
23. Cf. "New York, N.Y."

were in Shechem *City*) and his subsequent sale to Egypt.[24] The Sages'[25] remark that Shechem was a place marked for calamity on account of the upcoming Dinah debacle and Yosef's sale refers to the sprawling Shechem State.

'Yaakov camped just outside the city. And he (Yaakov) bought the field parcel where he had pitched his tent from the children of Chamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred kesitah.' These verses introduce one of the most disturbing chapters in the patriarch's family's life as we will see in the next *aliyah*. The Torah's seemingly irrelevant details intimate unintentional yet confluent factors with regards to sharing the blame and responsibility for Dinah's rape. To be sure, first and foremost, the lion's share of the fault for this unpardonable crime lies directly at Shechem's demented doorstep. And while other indirect acts may have lent an unsuspecting hand, at no time is there the suggestion that there were other culprits other than Shechem's family and townspeople. It is, however, criminology's purview to examine all of a grand felony's circumstances and evidence for the sake of prevention.

In that vein, consider the following interconnecting observations. First, the family set up residence in proximity of the city. 'And Dinah, Leah's daughter born to Yaakov went out to see the local girls.' Had the field purchased been further away from downtown, Dinah would have likely felt apprehensive about wandering far from home. Second, upon arrival Yaakov initially set up tent in a field. This perturbed the owners. Yaakov was not interested in renting and bought a parcel in the field. The state's magnate governor, Chamor, had been the seller. He probably collected an exorbitant price or he would not have sold. The governor, an older man, sent his sons to consummate the sale. Shechem, one of Chamor's sons, presumably met Dinah and became infatuated with this daughter of an obviously respectable, well-to-do man.

Though the Torah does not explicitly write how long Yaakov lived in Shechem, it is reasonable that the stay lasted quite a few years. Upon arrival, Dinah was a young girl of seven, unlikely to attract amorous attention. Shimon and Levi wiped out Shechem and must have been past young adolescence.

Logically, the patriarch had experienced much for which to be grateful. Long years of toil and stress were a thing of the past. Duplicitous Lavan had disappeared, in a manner of speaking, from Yaakov's rear view mirror. With

24. See chapter nine, second *aliyah*
25. BT *Sanhedrin* 102a

his nemesis Esav he had come to an accommodation of sorts. Not only had he merited a return to *Eretz* Yisrael, he was now the proud owner of some Holy Land acreage to call his very own, 'And he erected there an altar, calling out to the One God of Yisrael. Yaakov called Hashem's Name from the altar.' The patriarch proclaimed that above all else, Hashem reigns most high. The Jewish Nation falls under the control of no other celestial or angelic force. "Yisrael" actually translates as "governed by Hashem".

A third, final factor in the Shechem quagmire may have come into play when Yaakov had been religiously inspired and erected an altar. Presumably a thanksgiving dedication included local dignitaries' participation in the religious services and repast. Shechem may very well have struck up an interest in Dinah during those festivities. When Dinah later went out to see the local girls, Shechem pounced.

After examining the circumstantial explanations of Dinah's abduction, the coming *aliyah* tells of the outrage that wrenched a young girl's and family's heart.

Fifth *aliyah*

'And Dinah, Leah's daughter born to Yaakov, went to see the local girls.'

The verse introducing Dinah's tragedy states her obvious lineage. Why? The Torah testifies to her piousness. She, like her mother, bespoke refinement and reserve. Dinah modeled herself after Leah's modesty. Since *Tanach*'s modus operandi employs taut brevity, its personalities rarely appear as more than stick-figure biographical sketches. Concealed clues, nuance, and oral tradition give them body.

Leah's character[26] (and by extension Dinah) bears this out. When Yaakov first arrived to Padan Aram, it was outgoing Rachel and not homebody Leah who shepherded her father's flock. Reticence can also be deduced from her wedding night. Yaakov did not know with whom he had intimacy. When Leah, in a desperate quest to have more holy tribes, traded Reuven's mandrakes for her husband's company,[27] her overture to Yaakov was modest enough. Recall

26. Contra *Rashi* 34:1
27. Chapter seven, third *aliyah*

that when Yaakov returned from the field that evening Leah stepped out of her tent entrance saying: "You will come to me tonight."

Dinah imbibed reserve from Yaakov as well. Like father like daughter. Describing the young patriarch, the Torah wrote the following. 'And Yaakov turned introspective, sitting in academies.'[28] Without a doubt, Dinah bore absolutely no personal responsibility for the rape, not a scintilla.

Savagely victimized, Dinah's abduction should strike readers as a most heinous atrocity. What happened? The only daughter in a family of boys, she innocently entered the city to meet her peers and take in clothing styles and jewelry trends. 'And Dinah went to see the town's girls.' Understandably, that type of normal social exchange lacked in an all-male family. She certainly entered the city accompanied by a chaperone. As the young lady toured downtown, terror struck.

'And Shechem, son of Chieftain Chamor the Hivite saw her.

- He abducted her.
- Deflowered her.
- Painfully raped her.'

Fear of the consequences obviously did not interfere with his designs since the prince's father practically owned and ran the town. Psychologically crushed, Dinah crumbled. Alone in a foreign place, she was deprived of basic and essential family comfort. Things got worse.

The skunk *fell in love*. 'And he became heart struck for Yaakov's daughter Dinah, infatuated with the young lady. He professed his love for her.' Typically a rapist's spent passion turns acrid or violent towards their victims.[29] This was not the case with Shechem. After violating her body, he wanted her hand in matrimony. *As if strikingly beautiful Dinah and Yaakov's patriarchal family satisfied Shechem's standards!*

Shechem wooed her with vows of undying love and passion. When he proposed, the man's mercurial judgment revealed a major disconnect. 'And Shechem said to Chamor his father: "Arrange my marriage to the young woman."' Despite Chamor's usual practice of directing his empire from home, a hasty family meeting was scheduled at Yaakov's suburban residence. By the time Chamor's flunky arranged and subsequently announced the grandee's

28. Chapter six, first *aliyah*
29. Cf. Amnon and Tamar, *Shmuel* II 13:25

arrival, Yaakov had found out what happened. 'Shechem's father Chamor went to speak with Yaakov.' The patriarch's outer reaction assumed stony silence. He repressed his concern, pain, rage and indignation over his daughter's plight.

Before getting down to business, Chamor gauged his host. Yaakov's emotionless appearance made reading his mind impossible. However the chieftain assumed that his outward calm meant either Yaakov had not yet heard the news or that he was too faint of heart to deal with it. Chamor projected his personal value system: Boys will be boys; girls, girls.

Yaakov had intended to wait for his sons to return from pasturing the flocks because he sought their input and counsel. He did not relay the bad tidings to them due to his concern regarding their impulsive recklessness. The boys came home at the normal time and were stunned to hear the turn of events, or perhaps the news had traveled quickly prompting an early return home. Either way, they entered the tent to discover Chamor in their father's drawing room. 'The young men were deeply offended. Extremely furious, they reeled from the affront. An unconscionable act had been perpetrated upon the family! Taking Yaakov's daughter! In such a felonious manner!' The siblings dissected the criminal charges: Abduction! Fornication! Rape!

The patriarch's family confronted a filthy animal's penetration into their inner circle. Their mortification over intimate relations with an uncircumcised outsider racked them. Their rage over forced sex, against the local law which demanded relations in a marital context, consumed them. Dinah's brothers stifled these thoughts and feelings as they entered their father's residence where Chamor had begun to explain the reason for his visit.

Unexpectedly, Chamor's audience expanded to include Yaakov and sons. Sitting next to their father, they followed his staid cues. The chief began matter-of-fact discussions, unaware that the Jewish clan knew what his swine of a son had perpetrated. 'And Chamor said to them: "My son Shechem is desirous of your daughter. Hand her over to him in marriage now."' Chamor stressed that despite it being far below his station to associate with alien shepherds, unfortunate circumstances led to his son's affection for their peasant daughter. He recommended they agree at once, because Shechem could change his mind at any second…

Placing the proposal in a wider context, the governor painted the idea in cheery hues with an inter-clan panache. This *shidduch* would beget more. Yaakov could climb Shechem's social ladder. 'Marry in with us.' A hospitable

offer followed. 'Give us your daughters and take ours.' With the discovery of Shechem's crime in the back of his mind, sleazy Chamor intimated that if one of Yaakov's sons ever felt the urge to abduct a local girl, state law enforcement would look the other way.

Chamor thought that Yaakov might refuse on the grounds of his intent to seek out greener pastures, reluctant to leave his daughter behind. Looking to overcome that deal-breaker, the governor explained that VIP doors would open before the patriarch: 'You're welcome to dwell among us.' The politician enthusiastically extended seats on the state senate to the newcomers, coupled with the most-favored trading status or sprawling swathes of tillable, pasture lands. Whatever they wanted. Monumentally misreading Yaakov, the governor actually believed that temporal accoutrements might tempt the patriarch. *As if strikingly beautiful Dinah and Yaakov's patriarchal family somehow satisfied Chamor's standards!*

Discreetly Shechem added his two cents. Chamor's preamble sounded like Shechem wanted Dinah just for her looks. Additionally, fearing that Regent Chamor might demand a steep dowry for Dinah joining royalty, he privately stepped in to clarify. 'And Shechem said to her father and brothers: "You're going to like me. Just tell me what I can give to you."' Shechem offered to secretly rebate 100% of Chamor's demands and dowry costs. As long as he had permission to marry Dinah, nothing else mattered.

Exhibiting maximum self-control, Yaakov and sons had listened without interrupting. Torn with emotion for Dinah and seething with revenge's passion, the family did not have the luxury to sit still for long since multiple firm and concrete proposals had been tabled. Their response came.

'Yaakov's sons cunningly spoke to Shechem and Chamor his father.' Masterfully they responded without explicitly agreeing to anything. They began by stating the obvious. All but pointing to the elephant in the room, the brothers' razor-sharp tongue sliced through Chamor's sham. *Chamor, don't give us that nonsense about Shechem "desiring" Dinah.* 'Our sister Dinah has been compromised.' They accused without directly alluding to the pompous perpetrator.

The opening salvo set the record straight. In so many words, they described him as a *vilde chaya* – and well beneath Yaakov's minimum, basic family standards. Note how Dinah's brothers' response blasted Chamor's premises to smithereens. Chamor spoke of Shechem's true love for Dinah,

but the brothers called it by its real name – lustful passion and unbridled fornication fantasies. Chamor gloated of family prestige and high-bearing, but the brothers exposed behavior more resembling a grunting, groping galoot. Dinah's brothers ripped away at their lying self-aggrandizement. These "royal" visitors turned the brothers' stomachs.

Next the sons, ostensibly, set the conditions for their consent. Chamor and Shechem may have considered themselves members of a tony and well-heeled aristocracy but that is not how Yaakov's sons perceived them. Nowhere near! Shechem's proposed union with Dinah was inconceivable if not preposterous. Chamor's clan needed a major fix since they were subpar. 'And they said: "We cannot proceed and give our sister to an uncircumcised man. It offends us."' The brothers sent their second arrow flying straight into Shechem's heart.

Subtly the brothers tossed them a bone in the form of remedial steps. 'Here is a beneficial suggestion. Circumcise your male population like us.' A close reading reveals that the brothers never promised Dinah as a reward or consequence. Rather an advisory measure was suggested for those with higher aspirations. It amounted to a lecture on the salubrious benefits accruing to spiritual truth seekers. The brothers counseled Shechem and Chamor to encourage Shalem's residents to undergo circumcision, and marry with each other. That commandment offered them an antidote to their runaway libidos.

Additionally, 'We will give you our daughters and take yours. We will dwell with you and become one people.' Once circumcision's spiritual effects coalesce for a while, we can talk about marriage and harmonious neighborliness. But Dinah was never mentioned. Importantly, they never deviated from their very first response. 'We cannot proceed and give our sister to an uncircumcised man.' They knew that Dinah would only marry a circumcised man, but not any circumcised man.

Finally, the brothers employed inductive logic. 'If you do not heed us and circumcise then we will take our daughter and go.' A straightforward message stated that they would not subject Dinah to protracted humiliation. They would leave the province altogether.

The brothers' options were self-manifest. Namely, if the men agreed to circumcision, then they would be killed. If they balked then Shechem and Chamor would be exposed as recalcitrant. Outmaneuvered, the visitors missed

the sophisticated nuances and logical construction. Dinah's brothers had laid a subtle trap. Thinking that circumcision was the only obstacle blocking entry to Yaakov's family, they swallowed the bait – hook, line and sinker.

'And the young man did not put the matter [of circumcision] off since he desired Yaakov's daughter.' Meeting Yaakov up close overwhelmed Shechem. He could not dream of a better father-in-law. He ran to be the *mohel*'s first appointment, even though 'he held top position in his father's household.'

Selling the deal to the town's unsuspecting subjects would be a cinch. Of course there could be no mention of the brothers' conditions for Dinah and no hint about an expected conflagration over the issue. The citizens would have called on Chamor to cut his own way through his son's mess.

One imagines a typical political speech with all the trappings and jazz. Stumping at the town's main square, Chamor and Shechem gathered up the folks. 'These people are at peace with us.' Shechem had won over the girl and her family, and circumcision paved the way to the upcoming nuptials. They listened to stories about Yaakov the newcomer, and the broad future social and economic ramifications. Plenty of room for everyone. The blather continued regarding the union with the good people of Shechem. *Yaakov & Sons honest and hard-working immigrants… Yaakov & Sons peaceful intentions and wealthy etc.*

After reviewing the legalities and business opportunities, the topic of social intercourse came up. 'Let us take their daughters for our wives and give them our daughters.' Carefully crafted to elicit a positive response for the initiative, the governor sandwiched the caveat standing in the way of consummating a lucrative accord: Circumcision. 'However this will enable us to (seal) the men to dwell with us and be one nation. [Every man must] undergo circumcision as they are all circumcised.' Hebrews couldn't very well put their foreskin back on. The only way to avoid constant mutual insults was to be like them. The town hall rallies concluded with banner headlines in order to catch Main Street's attention. 'Their cattle, movables and animals are all ours.' Money, Money, Money for Circumcision! One hears the crowd's cheers after the demagogues concluded that it was all theirs for the asking.

Duped and manipulated, the locals went along with their ruler's demands. Of course, the principals stood the most to gain and yet couched the referendum as a public windfall. Given the demographic realities, Yaakov's

minority clan would be swallowed up by the larger, native population. Taking all factors as a whole (i.e. Yaakov's wealth, lack of city representation, natural anti-foreigner judicial bias) the constituents were swayed to overwhelmingly support the proposal.

The die was cast. Shechem's population, either desiring to show loyalty to their leaders or out of interest to milk Yaakov's wealth, dug their own grave. Yaakov's sons entered the city bearing *mohels*' knives. 'And the men at the gate were circumcised.'

'And it was on the third day [since Dinah's abduction] they (the patients) were in pain and Shimon and Levi, Dinah's brothers came to the unsecured city armed and massacred every man.' The Torah records how they 'knifed Chamor and Shechem before freeing Dinah from Shechem's house and escaped.'

An analysis of the entire affair reveals that only three days had elapsed.

- Day One: Abduction and Rape
- Day Two: High-level Agreement at Yaakov's Tent, Public Rallies and Ratification
- Day Three: Population Circumcision

That very day when Shimon and Levi massacred the men and freed Dinah marked only her third day of incarceration. Masterminding the kill took place under tremendous subterfuge. It is likely, for example, that the brothers – masquerading as *milah* recovery specialists – managed to isolate recovering patients from womenfolk and children. Gruesome work done, they shut the door and fabricated an exaggerated need for the men to have quiet and unattended recuperation time. Since Shimon and Levi pulled it off unassisted, presumably Shalem's population was small. Justice had been served when the main perpetrators met violent and sudden deaths. Most important, Dinah was free.

The two brothers ransacking, taking livestock and agriculture in addition to herding off women and children, emptied Shalem.

An overview offers readers an opportunity to summarize and determine the legitimacy of the complicated and disturbing episode.

- Shechem's abduction and rape of Dinah
- Chamor and Shechem's patently dishonest dealing
- A web of cover-up, lies and fraud
- *Bnei* Yaakov's revenge and massacre

Was Shimon and Levi's act justified? If so, what moral grounds legitimize it? The short answer to the first question is yes. Here is why. The ancients were already adjured to adhere to a compilation of Divinely transmitted Noahide Laws.[30] Shechem committed multiple violations thereof – kidnapping and illicit relations. The townspeople embroiled themselves as a result of their cavalier posturing towards their leader and his actions. Eventually the talk of the town apprised them of what was happening in the *mukhtar*'s palace yet they did not lodge a protest, let alone a censure. A breach of Noahide Laws carries capital punishment whether in cases of direct disobedience or in some cases even passive complicity.[31]

Moreover, when the townsmen underwent circumcision, it was with the express intent to use the ploy as a way to misappropriate Yaakov's wealth. *Quid pro quo* demanded a thorough looting of the place. Taking the womenfolk and children put a clamp on the news spreading to neighboring towns.

'And Yaakov said to Shimon and Levi: "You have besmirched and implicated me among the land's Canaanite and Prizite People. Small in number, I will be surrounded and smitten with my household."' Yaakov had no prior knowledge of his sons' plan.

If the brothers had acted honorably, why this biting criticism when Yaakov learned of the reprisal? Shock aptly captures the patriarch's reaction to his sons' recklessness and manifest appetite for risk. His charge amounted to dismay that they had irreparably undermined his reputation and brought an existential threat upon the family. Yaakov deplored his boys' taking a moral high road at expedience's expense. The potential local backlash could be incalculable. He cited the bitter demographic facts that spelled decimation.

Clearly, indignation and rage fueled the brothers' action. But that did not and could not justify inviting certain Canaanite knee-jerk revenge, thrusting a suicidal sword into a fledgling nation's heart. One sentiment alone validated risking everything by annihilating Shechem – shame.

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30. See BT *Sanhedrin* 56a. The first six of the Seven Noahide Laws prohibit:
    1) Idolatry
    2) Adultery and certain forms of incest
    3) Murder
    4) Consumption of a limb of a live animal
    5) Cursing Hashem
    6) Theft
    7) In addition, Noahides must implement a judicial/ social justice system
31. In *Rambam*'s understanding of the seventh Noahide law, a failure to prosecute violators of the other six commandments is punishable by death. (See Mishneh Torah *Hilchot Melachim* 9:14)

Dinah...a *zonah*. Inconceivable.

Yaakov's daughter...a *mufkeret*. Reprehensible.

Leah's daughter...a *perutzah*. Unconscionable.

Shimon and Levi's sister a dirty, dissolute, and despicable slattern? Her brothers paled but then galvanized as they shudderingly mulled new adjectives – wholly an anathema to pristine Dinah. Would this be forcibly pinned on to her, on their patriarchal destiny?

The two brothers' minds flashed forward to Dinah walking down the Shechem City streets. Noble inner eyes saw fingers wag; gallant inner voices heard locals snicker. A unified course of action sprung in order to preserve their family dignity, or die trying.

Shimon and Levi did not back down from Yaakov's rebuke. No. Instead they blurted a succinct assessment. 'And (better to do) nothing as our sister is turned into a whore?'

To be sure, Dinah's rape opened Pandora's Box. It forced the family to make excruciating decisions. The brothers saw it one way; Yaakov the other. Besides the emotive language and imagery that Shimon and Levi expressed to Yaakov, what motivated them? The explanation lay with a deeper understanding of Noahide Law that governs sexual mores.

Sexual intercourse was limited to set and designated spouses, or prostitutes. Therefore, had Dinah's brothers failed to punish the townspeople, the residents would likely reason that Dinah was a harlot. Why else did Shechem take her in the first place? This also clarifies the locals' devil-may-care attitude.

As a result, two courses of action presented themselves to the family:

Passivity and Forbearance v. Revenge and Massacre

Game-theory often assumes a zero-sum outcome. Pinpointed assassinations of Chamor and Shechem could not be seriously entertained. Such a response would inevitably bring town reprisals. The brothers, motivated by clearing Dinah's reputation, chose moral activism. Mental hurdles had been cleared and dauntless resolve drove their fighting spirit. Echoing the heroes of the ages they pledged death rather than an ignominious and spineless life. Heaven saluted. After Shimon and Levi accomplished the massacre Hashem granted them a safe passage out of town. 'And they traveled. Hashem (placed) dread over the surrounding cities (and caused that) they did not pursue the sons of Yaakov.' Paralysis grounded them.

In review note three observations with lessons for posterity.

- Daughters can generate more family shame and endangerment than sons.
- Personal sacrifice preserves family honor; avenging enemies as a moral obligation.
- Jewish women face challenges and obstacles outside of the home that demand careful consideration.

Obviously, the massacre radically altered the patriarch's plans. 'And Hashem said to Yaakov: "Arise and go to Beit El. Dwell there and build an altar to the Almighty Who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esav."' Besides prompting further progress toward Chevron, he conveyed an indirect message. Hashem did not want Yaakov to dally in seething Shalem's environs. The aftermath could prove prickly and a reliance on miracles was decidedly discouraged. Emphatically, the altar there had never been heavenly sanctioned. Better to offer a sacrifice in Beit El.

Beit El's destination must be seen in the proper context. Recall that there Yaakov had vowed a pledge to Hashem *if* he was granted protection. Shalem's prophecy and Yaakov's subsequent arrival in Luz/Beit El thus accomplished another thing. It clarified an outstanding conundrum. Yaakov harbored nagging doubts with regards to the ladder dream.[32] Had it truly been a prophecy or perhaps it was phantasmagoria? Had Hashem really communicated with him promising security and bounty? Or did an anxious fantasy masquerade as a vivid dream? This latest prophecy dispelled Yaakov's second-guessing. Beit El's original heavenly message was about to be corroborated and close a circle that started when Yaakov fled Esav.

Trekking onward, of course, necessitated preparation. Besides the considerable logistics, Yaakov had to get his own house in order. Convocation and religious confirmation called for a greater commitment to Avraham and Yitzchak's ways. Specifically Shalem's idolatrous paraphernalia had to be shed. 'And Yaakov said to his household and to those with him: "Remove your collected foreign idols. Purify yourselves. Prepare clean clothing."'

Yaakov urged a renewed sanctification. 'Let us get up and climb to Beit El. There I will build an altar to the Almighty Who answered me in stressful

32. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*

times and accompanied me on my journey.' The Lavan, Esav, and Shechem minefields had been traversed, relatively unscathed.

Note Yaakov's discretion here. When Hashem appeared to Yaakov with instructions to continue to Beit El, the reason given had to do with fleeing Esav. Yet when Yaakov addressed his family, he stressed thanksgiving for general Divine support. The patriarch did not bring attention to his flight from Esav because, at present, a patched accommodation held. And nothing would be gained by feeding the perception that Yaakov had been scared of his older brother.

Destination Beit El did not intimate that the patriarch had been delinquent in paying his prior pledged vows. He correctly calculated that his promise to sacrifice a thanks-offering for Divine protection came due only after the final safe passage to Yitzchak and Rivkah in Chevron. 'If I return in peace to my father's household, then Hashem will be my God and this rock which I placed as a monument will be the house of Hashem.'[33] Now the prophecy suggested advancing the vows in Beit El.

As testimony to Yaakov's family's moral fiber, change came immediately. 'And they gave to Yaakov all of the idols in their possession and worn nose rings. Yaakov buried them under the terebinth tree near Shechem.' Planting the trifling and primitive trinkets in the earth's bowels assured the patriarch that they would never again see the light of day. Shalem, clearly, had sullied more than Dinah's pristine reputation. After Yaakov's people rid themselves of the figurines, they began Beit El's mountain climb on the right foot.

'And Yaakov arrived in Canaan's Luz together with all his people. And he built there an altar and called Beit El the place of Hashem for there He had appeared to him when escaping his brother.' The ladder prophecy received validation. When Yaakov arrived in Luz, he built a thanksgiving altar to Hashem commemorating the prophecy received years earlier that had enlightened and apprised him of Hashem's inner sanctum. Luz/Beit El had been the spot where Hashem revealed to Yaakov that Beit El (the *mikdash*) is, in a manner of speaking, Hashem's earthly haunt. Furthermore, the ladder imagery taught him how *malachim* served as Hashem's heavenly actors and facilitators. In memorializing this event the verse teaches 'and he built there an altar and called Beit El the place of Hashem.' Certain of Hashem's methodology in the world, the patriarch called and publicized esoteric truths from a hallowed altar.

33. Ibid.

Beit El was and could now be loudly proclaimed and confidently confirmed as the seat of Divine Providence and influence.

Simultaneous with the uplifting spiritual revivalism in Luz/Beit El, Devorah passed away. 'Rivkah's nursemaid Devorah died and was laid to rest beneath (the foothills of) Beit El under the oak tree and he called its name Alon Bachut.' The mention of Devorah appears disjointed. The import is that if Hashem decreed that the house of Yaakov suffer loss for any missteps, the death of Devorah, a wise and valorous woman, was the fulfillment thereof. Still, the fleeting mention of a personality heretofore unknown baffles were it not for Jewish tradition. How did Devorah join Yaakov in the first place?

Consider two explanations. One, Devorah served as Rivkah's wise and trustworthy emissary to Yaakov announcing an all-clear signal. Recall Rivkah had promised escaping Yaakov that she would send a courier when it was safe to return home.[34] Devorah served in that capacity. Parenthetically, Devorah accompanied Yaakov's family home and offered invaluable and wise child-drearing guidance. Two, Devorah had accompanied Rivkah and Eliezer from Charan when Rivkah married Yitzchak.[35] At some undisclosed time, Devorah returned to Padan Aram. Yaakov had made her acquaintance in Lavan's household and it seems that she decided to join Yaakov to visit her former matron.

Tradition[36] interjects and explains the profound mourning following Devorah's death as the verse states 'he called its name Alon Bachut ("Oak of Tears").' Since the Torah does not write about the matriarch's death, it appears that Devorah's death is associated with it. The explicit mention of Rivkah dying without the comfort and honor of the presence of her children or grandchildren to eulogize and bury her was eschewed. Avraham had passed away; Yitzchak was blind and incapacitated; Yaakov absent; and Esav unwanted. Tragically, Rivkah's funeral was a hushed, nighttime affair.

The youngest son and patriarch broke down in tears eulogizing the devastating loss of his loving, dedicated mother who had thrown caution to the winds in securing a blessing for him; a woman who helped forge and shape Jewish destiny.

After Yaakov built the Beit El altar and proclaimed the ladder's esoteric meanings, he sacrificed gift offerings. Following the sacrifices, an additional

34. Chapter six, seventh *aliyah*
35. See chapter five, fifth *aliyah* ('They sent Rivkah their sister and her nursemaid.')
36. *Bereshit Rabbah* 81:5

prophecy came to him. 'And Hashem appeared to Yaakov another time when he returned from Padan Aram and blessed him.' This prophecy taught a three-tiered message. First, was the validation of the wrangling *malach*'s promise and name change.[37] Since that prophecy had been conveyed while Yaakov was awake and through a human-looking *malach*, it needed confirmation. 'And Hashem told him: "You will no longer be called by the name Yaakov. Yisrael will be your name."' It is important to observe that the ladder prophecy, inter alia, reinforced Yitzchak's firstborn blessings to Yaakov while the present prophecy bolstered the wrestler's. Hashem omitted the *malach*'s name change rationale implying that Yaakov's integrity and close connection to Hashem, alone, earned him bearing Yisrael's noble name.

As explained in *Parashat Lech Lecha*,[38] there is a fundamental difference between Avraham and Sarah's versus Yaakov's name change. In the first instance, after Avraham and Sarah's names were changed, their former names fell from usage.[39] Since Avraham and Sarah had been given birth names that reflected their prior godlessness, it was not fitting to retain their pagan-associations. That change represented an intrinsic and revolutionary upgrade. Not so in Yaakov's case. Yaakov was born to upstanding Yitzchak and Rivkah. Further the birth name at circumcision reflected an essentially religious ethos. The heaven-sent name Israel eternally enshrined his higher level, tethered to otherworldliness. It pinned to him, as it were, courage's badge. Yisrael did not negate Yaakov; it enhanced him.

The prophecy accomplished a second thing. The patriarch had been promised twelve not eleven sons. 'And Hashem said to him: "I am The Almighty. Go forth and multiply. A Nation and People will (yet) come from you. And Kings will emerge from your loins."' This prophecy, then, bespoke great promise and heralded Binyamin's birth. Indeed Yaakov's unborn children (including in a technical sense Yosef's two sons Efraim and Menasheh[40]) were ancestors to Shaul,[41] his son,[42] and many later kings of Israel's Northern Kingdom.[43]

Lastly, Beit El's prophecy provided a third harbinger as we read in the forthcoming *aliyah*.

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37. Second *aliyah* above
38. See chapter thee, sixth *aliyah*
39. BT *Berachot* 13a
40. See chapter twelve, first *aliyah* ('Ephraim and Menashe will be to me like Reuven and Shimon.')
41. See *Shmuel* I 9–31
42. See *Shmuel* II 2:8–4:7
43. See *Melachim* I 12 et al

Sixth *aliyah*

'And the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak, I give to you. And to your descendants after you, I give the land.'

The Holy Land's territory would not be apportioned to some of Yaakov's sons to the detriment of the others. All twelve tribes lay equal claim to the land. This contrasts Avraham's sending away Yishmael and Keturah's children from Israel[44] the same way Yitzchak marginalized Esav.[45]

Undoubtedly both of Yaakov's Beit El visions supplemented and complemented each other. The second prophecy, in that light, confirmed and validated the ladder message.

EN ROUTE TO PADAN ARAM	EN ROUTE TO CHEVRON
'I will always be at your side.'	The name change to 'Yisrael' means that Hashem is literally and figuratively 'with him.'
'And your seed will be like dust of the earth.'	The birth of eleven sons in Padan Aram and a future final tribe: 'A Nation and People will (yet) come from you.'
'The land upon which you lie I give to you and to your descendants.'	'And the land which I gave to Avraham and Yitzchak, I give to you. And to your descendants after you, I give the land.'

In sum, returnee Yaakov's second prophecy conclusively confirmed all that which had been relayed in the first one. As the patriarch contemplated the flashing, disparate images of a contending *malach* and deed to Canaan, he wondered whether Hashem intimated a connection between the two. Would the Land of Israel serve as the Yaakov/Esav conflict's epicenter? Would there be other boxing rings? Reminiscent of Avraham's covenant dream,[46] Yaakov attempted to attain better clarity. He wanted to make sense of those promises in light of the *malach* mugging that had nearly killed him. Hashem did not divulge. 'And Hashem ascended from him.' This entire episode had occurred

44. See chapter five, sixth *aliyah*
45. Chapter six, sixth *aliyah*
46. See chapter three, fifth *aliyah*

'in the place where He had (originally) communicated with him (in the ladder dream).'

The patriarch then built, purified, and dedicated another altar by anointing it. Note that Yaakov had also assembled an altar after the ladder dream prophecy.[47] Ostensibly, it remained. What, then, was the point of this second one? As discussed, Yaakov had questioned the ladder dream's validity. After this present Luz/Beit El prophecy, his doubts dissipated. Yaakov fully grasped the message's import. The altar rededication assumed meaningful overtones. 'And Yaakov called the name of the place where Hashem spoke with him "Beit El."' In a sense the first altar served as a provisional one.

Yisrael the last patriarch had now fulfilled his vow. He was no longer the frightened, young fugitive Yaakov gripped by existential fear who had uttered things in desperation. Those were far from empty sentiments. Yaakov's contribution to the Jewish Mystique had not come easily; he was a man of his word. The promise – day in and day out, measured in weeks, months and years – had stayed in his heart. Through it all, Yaakov never lost sight or hope that Hashem would be there for him. *Twenty years of unquestioning trust.* The etched words remembered and never forgotten: 'And Yaakov pledged saying: "If Hashem will be with me, watch over me on this road that I now travel, providing me with bread to eat and clothing. If I return in peace to my father's household…

PLEDGE	FULFILLMENT
'Then Hashem will be my God.'	Erecting altars and calling in Hashem's Name in Shechem and Luz
'This rock which I placed as a monument will be the house of Hashem.'	He called the placed Beit El. ("House of Hashem")
'All that which You give to me, I will tithe to You."'[48]	Despite the lack of explicit verses teaching Yaakov distributing alms to poor and needy, it can be assumed.[49]

47. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*
48. Ibid.
49. *Ibn Ezra*

Yisrael kneeled, caressed and dusted off stone by ancient stone, built his altar of eternal faith. The journey continued southward.

One imagines Yaakov's contentment after having built altars in Shalem and Beit El as this spiritual gesture elicits man's highest aspirations. One further imagines his measured satisfaction regarding the successful outcomes to the earlier brawling. The patriarch had, indeed, much to be pleased about because he was truly blessed. But if Judaism teaches anything, it teaches this world's fleeting nature. Tribulation had been shadowing Yaakov, and closed in even further. Calamity struck home.

'After leaving Beit El on the Efrata approach Rachel went into labor and experienced birth complications.' She died giving birth to her second son Binyamin. The midwife's attempt to console dying Rachel missed its mark. 'And when the birth emergency peaked the midwife said to her: "Don't fear. You are having a son. And it was as she lay dying in her final breaths she called her son Ben Oni ("son of my anguish and mourning"[50]).'"

Yaakov, by his most beloved's side, could not abide the remorse that recalled affliction. This was his only Israeli-born son. Yaakov utilized the word Oni's positive connotation, implying strength.[51] 'And his father called him Binyamin' personifying man's strong right hand.

The distance to Chevron determined that Rachel be interred along the Efrat-Beit Lechem Road to avoid advanced decomposition prior to burial. 'Yaakov mounted a gravestone to mark the burial spot.' A lone oversized marker informed all passersby and visitors that here lays a woman of valor, taken away young.

This seemingly hasty location in which Yaakov buried Rachel has aroused commentary discussion.[52] Her burial in Efrat-Beit Lechem was ruled out because Yaakov prophetically sensed that the territory belonged to Yehudah.[53] The best solution under the tragic exigency dictated that connecting the Binyamin/Yehudah territorial roads made the most sense.

Yaakov rounded his way home. Each succeeding stop planted a tragedy. Dinah's rape, Devorah's death, Rivkah's death, Rachel's death. Even these were

50. Cf. *Devarim* 26:14 לא אכלתי באוני ממנו
51. Cf. *Bereshit* 49:3 כחי וראשית אוני
52. *Ramban*
53. See e.g. *Rut* 1:1 et al

not the end of it. The narrative turns to Reuven's actions which only exacerbated the patriarch's sorrows and hurt home.

The family took its final farewell from the matriarch, pushing on to Chevron. Migdal Eder was the last stop before the reunion with Yitzchak. While there Reuven acted scandalously with Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid. 'And it was when Israel had dwelled in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine. Yisrael heard of it.'

Opposing traditions[54] have effectively blurred the facts and thus they remain unknown. Two sordid possibilities are: a) Reuven had sexual intercourse with Bilhah or b) Reuven tampered with his father's bed. This was to prevent Yaakov from having more children, which mattered most to Reuven as his firstborn entitlement earned him a double portion in the inheritance.[55] Alternatively, he moved his father's bed from Bilhah's tent to Leah's. Yaakov's eldest son lodged sanctions over his father's alleged affront to Leah, Reuven's mother. Yaakov's intention to move in to Bilhah's home was a sign of affection and blatant spousal preference.

'Yaakov heard.' Either Bilhah or the brothers told him what had transpired. How did he react? Inconclusively, a muted response well matched Reuven's apparently smoke-screened deed. The patriarch did not disown his firstborn son nor was there any mention of rebuke, intimating that the affair did not occur as it literally reads. Yaakov's silence, however, was broken as he lay dying and blessed his twelve sons, appropriately denying Reuven firstborn privileges.[56] At any rate, no children were subsequently born to Yaakov, thus enumerating a holy family intact. The Sages[57] emphasize all twelve sons' parity in sanctity. 'And Yaakov's sons numbered twelve.'

The Torah streamlines events when Yaakov finally did arrive home. Decades of separation punctuated meaningful years with his ancient father. 'And Yaakov came to his father Yitzchak in Mamre Kiryat Arba, Chevron where Avraham and Yitzchak had dwelled. And Yitzchak's years reached one hundred and eighty.' His concluding years had been spent surrounded by his son and grandchildren. Note that mention of Yitzchak's passing is out of place because he died twelve years *after* Yosef was sold. *Bereshit*'s final four

54. BT *Shabbat* 55b
55. *Devarim* 21:17
56. Assuming that was Reuven's issue
57. Ibid.

parshiyot focus exclusively on Yaakov and his twelve sons' lives. For that reason Yitzchak's life chapter is sealed here.

Closing a long and heroic life that clung devotedly to his father Avraham's ways, the middle patriarch 'was buried by his sons Esav and Yaakov.' Though not explicit, Yitzchak and Rivkah's traditional final resting place deservedly is located in Chevron's *me'arat haMachpelah*.

'And these are Esav's progeny. He is (also known as) Edom.' After the Torah noted Yitzchak's death, it turned to cover his descendants' lives and major events. As stated, the final *parshiyot* detail Yosef and his brothers' story. These verses chronicle Esav's seed. He sired several children from three wives: Ada a.k.a. Bosmat, Aholivamah a.k.a. Yehudit and Bosmat a.k.a. Machalat. Rashi[58] quoting the Sages explains why they all had aliases.

His immense wealth and holdings made permanent dwelling in Canaan alongside returning magnate Yaakov impractical. Edom deferred to his younger brother. 'And Esav took his wives, sons, daughters and household, herds and animals and entire possessions that he acquired in the Land of Canaan. And he went to the land [of Seir] on account of Yaakov his brother.'

The verse clearly writes that Esav moved to Mt. Seir only after Yaakov arrived home. This is curious. The *parashah*'s opening sentence teaches 'and Yaakov sent *malachim* ahead to Esav his brother (residing) in the Land of Seir, field of Edom.' The explanation is that Esav and his family had generally resided in Canaan. However, Esav regularly frequented Mt. Seir with his men because, plausibly, the area was home to happy hunting grounds. Thus nothing precluded Yaakov from sending messengers to his brother's secondary address. That situation changed when Yaakov settled in Chevron. Owing to the two men's substantial cattle and grazing needs and out of brotherly affection, Esav unilaterally left Canaan for Mt. Seir completely. Esav knew of Yaakov's attachment to Canaan and his future takeover of that land. 'And Esav dwelled in Mt. Seir.' Likely the permanent move occurred after Yitzchak passed away.

'And these are Esav's descendants, father of Edom in Mt. Seir.' Esav's children all were born in Canaan and now verses teach that his grandchildren's birth country was Mt. Seir. The *parashah* concludes with a lengthy and

58. *Rashi* to *Bereshit* 33:6

detailed list of Esav's wives, children, and grandchildren's names. This serves three important purposes:

- The pedigree effects a specific Torah prohibition. Jews may not hate Esav.[59] Hence it is crucial to know which nations are, so to speak, protected. The notable exception, of course, is Esav's grandson Amalek born to Eliphaz's (Esav's son) concubine. Amalek's seed are to be eradicated on account of their atrocities committed against the Jewish People.[60]
- Giving a roster of Esav's descendants provides a stark, contrasting backdrop to Yaakov's sons. Whereas Esav's motley crew resulted from unbridled and incestuous relationships, Yaakov established itself on family purity principles and standards. 'And Timna was Elifaz's son of Esav's concubine.' Aholivamah, Korach, and Timna were *mamzerim*. The Sages[61] derived these facts from various genealogical twists in the verses here.
- Esav's family assumed leadership positions due to their illustrious patriarchal forebears. 'These are the *Alufs* of *Bnei* Esav: *Bnei* Elifaz, Esav's eldest – *Aluf* Teman, *Aluf* Omar, *Aluf* Tzepho, *Aluf* Kenaz.' Despite Esav's family's newcomer status in Mt. Seir, they swiftly swooped and dominated a sizeable land area traditionally associated with others. *Bnei* Seir the Horite had their power wrested away from them by Esav's sons who maintained prominence. The Torah does not chronicle Esav's prowess and conquests. However an unspoken explanation for his successes was Yitzchak's blessing 'you will live by the sword.'[62]

The narrative recorded Esav's family and habits for posterity. His entire familial structure and system relied on hapless surrender to animalistic exuberance. This hodgepodge mindset spilled over to include bizarre livestock engineering experimentation. As a quirky tidbit, tradition relates that they bred donkeys and horses resulting in, of course, mules. Morally, *mamzerut* is a dead end proposition.

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59. *Devarim* 23:8
60. Ibid. 25:17
61. *Bereshit Rabbah* 82:15
62. Chapter six, sixth *aliyah*

Seventh *aliyah*

'These are the sons of Seir the Horite dwelling in the land: Lotan and Shoval and Tzivon and Anah.'

On the political and administrative front, the Torah records how Esav's generals and chieftains morphed, for a time, into kingships. 'And these are the kings that ruled in Edom before the Jewish monarchy had been established.' Edom's was not an orderly hereditary monarchy but rather ragtag and random, sometimes occupied by foreigners. This was because the seat of government moved frequently and inexplicably. The venues included: Dinhavah, Batzrah, Eretz HaTemani, Avit, Masrekah etc. The Sages[63] noted that the eight kings of Edom were offset by the eight Jewish monarchs who kept Edom subdued underfoot. The kingdom's final regent's wife is mentioned due to her father-in-law being the true power behind the throne on account of his immense wealth.

Eventually, Edom's monarchy reverted back to canton chieftains. 'And these are the lists of Esav's *alufs'* names according to their clan and location.' The key point is not to teach political science from a Biblical perspective. Rather Esav's feat in occupying and conquering Mt. Seir had been a major accomplishment especially considering the roots of the ancient peoples who had long dominated there. Again, Yitzchak's blessing wrought all this. A lack of adherence to the patriarch's ways, however, resulted in embroiled family affairs.

In sum, these last verses provide some closure. In permanent contrast, Esav and Yaakov displayed different inclinations at conception, birth, adolescence, and well into adulthood. Their polar differences continued throughout their descendants' lives, as well. Esav's tree dropped deep, entangled roots. Yaakov's shoot climbed most true, a noble vine indeed.[64] At this *parashah's* juncture, however, their gory historical struggle slunk into remission. Esav dwelt in Mt. Seir, Edom. Yaakov reestablished his home life in Canaan.

63. *Bereshit Rabbah* 83:2
64. Cf. *Yirmiyahu* 2:21

CHAPTER NINE

PARASHAT VAYESHEV

FOUL DISAPPEARANCE

First *aliyah*

'Yaakov dwelled in the land of his father's sojourns, in the Land of Canaan.'

This *parashah* introduces Yaakov's final years. *Vayeshev* is the first of four concluding *parshiyot* of *Bereshit* (*Vayeshev, Miketz, Vayigash and Vaychi*) whose hub revolves around Yosef and his brothers. This narrative traces the root causes, planning, execution and aftermath of one of *Tanach*'s most protracted scandals. For the patriarch, Yosef and the brothers' story ratcheted up one last heartache in tragic concatenation.

'Yaakov dwelled in the land of his father's sojourns, in the Land of Canaan. These are Yaakov's life events. Yosef was seventeen when he oversaw his brothers in flock administration.' There are two distinct ways to understand these introductory verses. The first[1] requires a preface by way of defining two key words: "dwell" (*vayeshev*) and "sojourn" (*megurei*). *Dwelling* suggests something that is settled and serene. By contrast, *sojourn* conveys transience but also carries connotations of fear[2] as well as bickering and provocation.[3]

The *parashah*, therefore, sets the tone whereby Yaakov settled into his father Yitzchak's fearful existence mode, witnessing gut-wrenching sibling wrangling. As such, readers get a foreshadowing regarding Yaakov's angst. Yitzchak had been dragged into his twins' rivalry. Now Yaakov will be hooked into his own sons' contentiousness.

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1. Based on *Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim* I:11
2. E.g. *Devarim* 1:17 לא תגורו מפני איש
3. E.g. *Devarim* 2:9 אל תתגר בם

Consider an overview listing six aspects whereby Yitzchak and Yaakov's lives overlapped.

- Their domestic life was shattered by acerbic sibling rivalry.
- Paternal favoritism chose sides, pitting brother against brother. Yitzchak initially preferred Esav; Yaakov favored Yosef.
- Both men were separated from their sons for twenty-two years.[4] Yaakov went to Padan Aram, Yosef to Egypt.
- The respective patriarchs' absent sons began their hiatus flat broke, yet both would live to see those same sons amass fabulous wealth.
- The last years of both patriarchs witnessed their children's reconciliation and a modicum of accommodation.
- After long lives, they merited burial in their offspring's attendance.

Unmistakably, Yaakov's major life events eerily resembled – practically dittoed – those of Yitzchak's. Therefore the *parashah*'s opening sentences better read: 'Yaakov *relived* his father's vicissitudes. That was Yaakov's history.'

A second approach zeroes in on a different element of comparative patriarchal analysis. After his matrimony and family life priorities, Yaakov's focus during the Lavan years was dedicated to accumulating wealth and chattel. He kept long hours and was exceedingly driven. Recall his words to Lavan: 'Sweltering day heat tortured me (and) frosted nights. My eyes forgot how to sleep.'[5] Hardworking Yaakov, to be sure wished to toil in Canaan, but in a different way altogether. While Padan Aram had been a veritable bank-account bonanza, Chevron spelled single-minded service and religious contemplation to the Almighty. In that context, the *parashah*'s first verse points to Yaakov dwelling in his father's *spiritual* space. Retired, he delegated the financial levers to his strapping sons' control. Indeed the returnee epitomized wholehearted dedication to Avraham and Yitzchak's values and teachings. Yaakov would now pursue piety, shunning the distraction of things mundane.

The Promised Land's pure air and light provided vibrant colors and hues that filled the third patriarch's canvas. Yaakov cared little that his flocks would not flourish in Chevron's mountainous, rocky terrain. He relied on his boys' drive and energy to find appropriate pasture land. The verse's words may be interpreted to show how Yaakov stayed put in Chevron, thus following in

4. BT *Megillah* 17a
5. Chapter seven, sixth *aliyah*

Yitzchak's transcendental sojourns. To Yaakov's credit, he was able to put his money matters behind him. Unlike typical, retired businessmen no longer absorbed in deal-making who flounder to find gainful meaning, the patriarch knew how to prioritize and move on to life's real purpose. Moreover, in so doing he fulfilled a promise made in Beit El 'If I return in peace to my father's household, then Hashem will be my God.'[6] Divine service was not the most important thing to the patriarch at this juncture. It was the only thing.

Last *parashah* concluded the third forefather's exile narrative 'and Yaakov came to his father Yitzchak in Mamre Kiryat Arba, Chevron where Avraham and Yitzchak had dwelled.' Clearly this verse is not a directory listing a street address. Their hometown was obvious to all. Rather it explains Yaakov's motive for coming back; he craved and thirsted for Torah. Not surprisingly, Yaakov and Chevron clicked. He returned to a quiet existence that best matched his natural reticence and introspection.

Spirituality yes, seclusion no. The patriarchs did not selfishly sequester the Torah. Like Avraham before him who professed Hashem's truth to strangers, it is unthinkable that Yaakov would not share his timeless pearls with his family. Certainly he devoted time to all of his children, passing on the cherished traditions of their illustrious grandfather and great-grandfather. Consequently all twelve tribes developed into excellent, refined, young men of virtue.

Indeed all were virtuous. But one ranked superlative. The next verse reads: 'And these are Yaakov's products…**Yosef**.' Yaakov saw in Rachel's oldest son a cut above the rest, dedicating his time to longer quality learning sessions with him. The patriarch recognized his uncanny traits and precociousness. The two grew close, and extremely tightly bonded. 'Yosef was seventeen when he oversaw his brothers in flock administration.' None of Yaakov's sons were, per se, shepherds. They all served as herders' bosses or supervisors. The Torah singles out Yosef alluding to his skill and acumen. Yosef was the CEO of Yaakov & Sons.

Continuing with the narrative it says that the seventeen year old 'attended to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as though they were Yaakov's full wives. And Yosef brought (word of) their bad reputations to their father's attention.'

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6. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*

Tucked in the verse's tight structure, Yosef's four remarkable achievements stand out:

- *Initiative* Yosef, then, was entrusted with overall family business management. 'Yosef was seventeen when he oversaw his brothers in flock administration.'
- *Humility* Cognizant of his family placement among his older brothers, he acted subservient- even to the handmaids' sons. Desiring to mitigate the sting of his corporate ladder leapfrog, he went out of his way to treat all of his older brothers as his seniors. '...attended to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as though they were Yaakov's full wives.'
- *Caring* Yosef felt a strong concern for his brothers and could not abide by character deficiencies. 'And Yosef brought (word of) their bad reputations to their father's attention.' This was not done to elevate his standing at their expense, which is often the self-appointed morality policemen's motive. He truly cared about his brothers' development and growth. As executive shepherd, though, he rarely visited the fields. As already stated, Yosef managed and delegated from Chevron when he was not learning Torah with his father. However, when confronted with disparaging rumors, he reported them to Yaakov in the townspeople's name, and thus maintained anonymity. Exercising maximum discretion and tact, he told their father incriminating city whispers from third party sources. This way, he hoped Yaakov would deal with the issues appropriately. Torah is an anathema to tale-bearing and slander.[7] The Sages[8] explain that Yosef would have been better off had he ignored the allegations since he could not personally vouch for their veracity.
- *Righteousness* Yosef strove towards reaching personal perfection. Like Moshe after him, he could not tolerate injustice.[9]

In summary, Yosef, despite being endowed with greatness, downplayed his formidable abilities. Still he expected his brothers to maintain the high family stature and integrity. Yosef imbibed Yaakov's fine tutelage, and flourished.

'And Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his other brothers.' Typical fatherly affection does not adequately explain Yaakov's bias for Yosef. If it were that

7. See *Vayikra* 19:16
8. *Bereshit Rabbah* 84:7
9. See *Shmot* 2:11–17

simple, then why single out one child to the detriment of eleven others? Rather the Torah emphasizes something more profound. Yaakov marveled at Rachel's firstborn's genius and virtue. Specifically, Yosef captured his father's attention as a hard-working, creative managerial force capable of controlling vast financial operations. Despite his executive acumen, he observed deference within the family/social system. Yosef did not encroach on his older brothers' rights, fully recognizing his lower hierarchal placement. In the academic halls of study, Yosef exhibited the thorough analytical depth befitting of elderly and experienced sages.

Yaakov tracked his son's agile grace and balancing act that sized up the disparate demands of the moment. With his brothers Yosef bustled with youthful energy, attending to their needs. But this was not simply due to an effervescent nature. With his father 'he was a son perfect for an elderly parent' – endless patience, a sea of serenity. Yosef, Yaakov noted, rolled back and forth seamlessly. His adroit use of apposite attributes attested to his absolute presence of mind.

In acknowledgement and reward, Yaakov 'gave him a special coat.' Especially in the olden days of demarcated societal castes, the suit made the man. The Sages[10] cautioned scholars against public appearances adorned with anything less than spotless, smart attire. In Yosef's case, his coat marked his superb interdisciplinary achievements.

His graduation *magna cum laude* did not go over well. 'And the brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers and they loathed him. They could not speak to him civilly.' Was this simply a case of petty jealousy? Pretty much.

The older brothers failed to recognize or appreciate Yosef's greatness. Incapable of attributing Yosef's rise to personal prowess, they chalked it up to dirty politics. After all, hadn't Yosef badmouthed his brothers to their father? Doubtless, Yaakov did not tolerate the pernicious allegations of family misdoings and rebuked them. They chafed at their father's firm admonishment. Naively, the brothers misconstrued Yosef's role. Apparently uninterested in plumbing the chastisement's rationale they instead imagined Yosef's machinations. Of course, Yaakov did not disclose his sources of information to his other sons, but they put two and two together. Who else could know of everything they did – wherever they were? Reclusive Yaakov, they assumed, loved hearing daily snippets of *The Chevron Daily Breeze*, and cherished Rachel's little birdie whispering in

10. BT *Shabbat* 114a; *Berachot* 43b

his ear. Their key initial and fatal misread of the relationship's underpinnings snowballed, gnawed, and grew until it assumed exaggerated proportions.

A second perspective paints Yosef as an existential threat to the common family heritage and inheritance. Rachel's home had long been Yaakov's prime residence. That was, of course, no secret. However, the private tutorials coupled with Yosef's coat exacerbated family fears as it provided palpable evidence of a highly exclusive primogeniture. Comparing their lot with discarded and exiled Yishmael and Esav, the fraternal rivalry heated. The sibling struggles appeared hueless – black or white, do or die. The brothers considered a joint strategy to combat the eviction notices, should they arrive.

At first, things were icy but bearable. That changed. 'They could not speak to him civilly.' That is, the brothers stopped initiating conversation but answered curtly. The dam cracks widened when Yosef related his dreams of grandeur. 'And Yosef dreamt a dream and he told it to his brothers. They despised him even more.' *As if the brothers needed more proof of Yosef's unconcealed and boundless ambition!* Even answering his greetings ceased. They saw him as positively pompous. When talk of that celestial dream, with all of its bluster of kingship came out, it ruptured brotherly bonds. Tattered and raw nerves and egos were all that remained. In the brothers' minds, Yosef declared war and lobbed the first salvo.

Yosef sorely messed up the interpersonal signals. The brothers hated him but Yosef harbored no hard feelings. He related his dreams, not as self-assertion but as friendly schmoozing. They spurned him. Yosef genuinely wanted to hear their input. What did they make of the peculiar dream series?

Paranoia and envy poisoned even the innocuous dream stuff. Yosef could not do a single thing right. Each word and sentence, it seemed, got knotted and twisted. Oddly processed, it fermented into sinister sentiment. Minefields exploded wherever he walked. In an acrid environment, the insecure brothers chose separation because they could not stomach what they thought to be a duplicitous saccharin sap. It sickened them.

A greater disconnect could not have transpired. The brothers had had enough of his affectation and thinly disguised self-aggrandizement. Yosef, for his part, could not figure out what irked them so much. Yet, on principle he did not rise to the bait. Yosef adopted a mature attitude and would not allow their incomprehensible behavior to sully his own. Accordingly, he never stopped

engaging his brothers. Whatever riled them, Yosef believed more talking would patch things. 'And he said to them: "Please. Listen to the dream that I dreamt."'

'And behold we were gathering wheat sheaves in a field. And my sheaf arose, standing upright. Your sheaves gyrated yet bowed to my sheaf.' What did those dreams signify? Were they puff or prescient? In retrospect, the dream content burst at the seams because Yosef's future would wax wildly successful.

- *Agriculture* The first dream featured *wheat sheaves*. It alluded to Yosef's meteoric rise in power centered on Egypt's surfeited bread basket.
- *Self-sufficient* Yosef would not need his brothers to crown him as leader. His stalk *arose* of its own accord.
- *Endurance* His inordinately protracted rule would last an unprecedented eighty years. A sheaf *standing upright* alluded to this.
- *Fate* Nothing deterred Yosef's ascendancy. Try as the brothers might to undermine Heaven's plans, it came to naught. *Gyrating* maneuvers did not dent the grand scheme's end game – *prostration*.
- *Dependence* Famine brought the brothers to Egypt where they submissively bowed not to Yosef per se, but on account of the *sheaves* he had to offer.

Summing up the first dream, note that it spanned the period *prior* to brothers' grasping viceroy Yosef's identity. The coded message featured Yosef's grain standing tall despite his siblings' countermeasures. Yosef's main role, surely, had not been lost on them. They sniped. 'And the brothers said to him: "Will you reign over us? Subjugate us?" And they loathed him more on account of his dreams and due to his words.' Their revulsion was akin to the natural feelings one has, say, toward the Angel of Death due to the fear of his lethal scythe. Obsessed by concerns of displacement, they shuddered in wonderment if their father might extend and pamper his paternal blessings upon Yosef's fantasies. It may well be that the brothers doubted the dream's existence, figuring it was contrived to vex them. Hence, they hated him 'due to his words' of fancifulness or embellishment.

'And he dreamt again and he told his brothers. And he said: "Behold I dreamt another time. The sun, the moon and eleven stars bowed down to me."' The second dream of celestial bodies exceeded the first one's gravity. The schemata charted Yaakov as the sun. The moon referred to the patriarch's wives and household while the eleven stars represented his brothers. Here, the prostration

is before Yosef himself, not his sheaf. With full cognition that their brother Yosef was before them, the family would bow before him upon their descent to Egypt.

The brothers did not venture an interpretation. Possibly they lacked ideas or perhaps they figured that detrimental dreams are best left un-interpreted.[11] Yosef, they posited, had more than enough big notions.

Intriguingly, Yosef retold the second dream to the patriarch as well, probably due to his father's role in it. 'And he told it to his father and brothers.' Yaakov saw sibling hostility belch like volcanic gurgling. A sardonic rejoinder ensued. 'And his father rebuked him and he said to him: "What is the meaning of this dream you dreamt? Will I, your mother and brothers prostrate [ourselves] on the ground before you?"'

Yaakov dismissed the dream out of hand, exposing its weakest link – Yosef's departed mother's participation. Perhaps Yaakov rejected it, ostensibly, on three counts. One, what prods an unnatural act of a father prostrating to a son? *CHUTZPAH*... Two, how does Yosef's deceased mother play any role? Three, given the brothers' disdain, why would they show even a smidgen of interest in, let alone cooperate with, Yosef's ideas? Painting this dream phase as nothing more than immature, narcissistic babble, Yaakov demanded an end to a Napoleon complex presentation. He took the brothers' side. Perhaps Yaakov thought the sibling relationship was salvageable.

While outwardly indignant, the patriarch may have held wonderment in abeyance regarding Yosef. Was he capable of receiving Divine messages garbed in dreams? Yaakov needed no convincing of Yosef's far reach. He hedged, bracing himself for the dream's unfolding. The brothers, for their part, slowly began to understand what the dreams' repetition meant. It spelled their undoing. Jealousy replaced hatred. 'His brothers envied him; his father bided for time.'

The brothers heard both dreams but only responded to the first for the reasons listed above. Yaakov had been told about the second one. What was Yosef thinking when he retold these dreams to his brothers? As mentioned previously, he hoped that confiding intimate matters would demonstrate love

11. Cf. BT *Berachot* 55b – 'All dreams follow their interpretation.' In *Parashat Miketz* Abravanel offers a very lengthy essay on the topic of dreams (see chapter ten, first *aliyah*). Therein, he explains the above statement to mean that interpretation simply allows the dreamer to *realize* that his dream has come true, not that the interpretation actually affects outcome. Accordingly, Abravanel here means that even if Yosef's dream came true, they preferred that he not make any connections to his annoyingly prescient vision.

and dispel anxiety. Yosef wanted to clear his busybody and sullied reputation, and at the same time nudge his brothers to a higher level of sophistication. His father's singling him out with gifts had nothing to do with the snitching and slanderous tattletales. Yosef humbly attempted to engender sibling trust and assistance in carrying out a colossal mission. If only the brothers looked at the big picture, mutual advantage could result.

Yosef's high reach fell miserably flat. It stoked hate and jealousy, further fostering, as it were, a continental divide. From that moment, the brothers thought of only one thing. How do we rid ourselves of this threat to our home life's fiber? Eyeing a bleak future, they saw no way out. If an established Avraham and Yitzchak model resurfaced, someone had to go – them or Yosef.

Second *aliyah*

'And his brothers went to pasture their father's flock in Shechem.'

The brothers decided that they would remove themselves, a timeout of sorts. Pasturing the herds in Shechem, they aimed to accomplish three things:

- *Distance* Space enabled them to escape Yosef's vigilance and put an end to his nosy, evil reporting.
- *Dignity* Quoting a common proverb: Out of sight, out of mind. If their father continued to shower more showy gifts upon "The Designated One," their removal softened and buffered the sting.
- *Vengeance* Should their father send Yosef to inquire about them, the opportunity for revenge may present itself. Who can say if that plan did not bring them to Shechem? Though we have learned in *Parashat Vayishlach* that the young men did not go as far north as Shalem,[12] still Shechem State could hardly have forgotten the massacre. Could an alleged local reprisal provide good cover for disposing of Yosef?

'And Yisrael said to Yosef: "See here. Your brothers are pasturing the flocks in Shechem. Go and I will send you to them."' Goodheartedly, the patriarch chided Yosef. Why should he remain home amid creature comforts while the other brothers roughed it outdoors? 'Yosef replied: "I am here. Ready."' Yosef dutifully closed his *sefer* and packed up for a journey.

12. See chapter eight, fourth *aliyah*

'And he said to him: "Go and see how your brothers and the flocks fare and then report back to me." And he sent him from Chevron's vale. And he set out for Shechem.' Then Yaakov backtracked. After observing Yosef's willingness and eager cooperation, his father softened. As if substituting an afterthought, Yaakov believed no full participation in the brothers' occupation was called for. A simple errand run would suffice. Since Shechem held no safe zone for the brothers, Yosef was to ascertain that they were secure and come right back with his findings. Yaakov lovingly accompanied Yosef from mountainous Chevron to the valley below before turning back home.

Setting out to find a *minyan* of shepherds with sizeable flocks was not exactly finding a proverbial needle in a haystack. However, Yosef lacked their itinerary and location. Besides, Shechem State covered lots of terrain. Intuitively he began putting out feelers for gathering clues along the way. As things turned out, the clue found him.

Yosef, seemingly quizzical, looked like he lost something. 'And a man found him wandering around the region. The man asked: "What do you seek?"' The stranger's tone and phrasing sounded cautionary. *Are you sure what you seek is to your benefit? Perhaps you are looking for... trouble.* Yosef noted the layered message but brushed aside distractions. He had come on a mission. 'And he answered: "I am looking for my brothers."' The man's question had indicated some familiarity with Yosef, so he would assuredly know of his family. Yosef pressed the man to reveal the brothers' location since the highway he had taken was ostensibly along the brothers' expected route. 'And the man said: "They have digressed from this route because I overheard them say: 'Let's go to Dotan.' "' *You call them your brothers but they have gone in a completely different direction. Beware.* The kind stranger's face conveyed concern.

This outsider's knowledge of a confidential conspiracy prompted the Sages[13] to identify the "man" as the *malach* Gavriel. Possessing acumen, Yosef caught the innuendos but refused to be deterred. The bottom line mattered and the earnest emissary did not want to disappoint his father. Turning back had not even been an option. It was as if a mighty magnetic field tugged, pulled him to them. Providence had set the wheels of the Egyptian exile in motion. Repressing unidentifiable pangs, Yosef edged closer. Yaakov had sent Yosef to Shechem without recognizing the lurking peril. Fully aware that Yosef had never wronged his brothers, the forefather never dreamt they would harm him.

13. *Tanchuma Vayeshev* 2

Heeding his father's command, Yosef persisted until he caught up with them in Dotan. As he approached, the brothers identified him. 'And each said to his brother: "Here comes the dreammeister."' Their acrimony had surpassed simmering. It now boiled rapidly. The brothers denied the dreams' existence altogether, chalking them up to nothing more than a tyrant's machinations. Time alone in the countryside allowed them to mull their options. A frank discussion turned into a workable, readied strategy. 'And now let's get up, kill him and throw him into one of the pits. We'll say that that a ferocious predator devoured him. Then we'll see what becomes of his dreams…'

The Torah does say that murder was selected as the course of action, but no minutes of their deliberations were recorded. It is reasonable to assume, though, that a partisan debate preceded the verdict. What, then, were the substantive issues?

Start first with the fraternal consensus. By varying degree, it was assumed that Yosef irreparably endangered the normative primogeniture of the family structure. The internal threat needed to be neutralized. Divergent opinions were advanced as to the method and the vigorous argument split the brothers into two sides. Some proposed the death penalty, while others recoiled from it. The proponents of execution dominated the discussions and these verses reflect their position. 'Here comes the dreammeister. Let's finish him off…so there won't be any more dreams of grandeur.' The Sages[14] finger Shimon and Levi as this initiative's co-sponsors.

Chief opponents Reuven and Yehudah objected to the radical solutions. The handmaids' sons would not speak up after the matrons' sons had expressed their opinion, and besides they did have some vestiges of appreciation for Yosef's obliging attitude toward them. Despite being marginalized, it seemed that Shimon and Levi's bravado (bolstered by their having masterminded and carried out Shechem's massacre) would override an irresolute majority's oppositional quorum.

Shechem State would host more bloodshed. Attempting to enlist the straddling tribunal members, the assassins supplied a foolproof cover story. A replete, cloak-and-dagger plot spared no details. 'We'll say that that a ferocious predator devoured him.'

Reuven spoke out against capital punishment. 'And Reuven heard and rescued him from their hands. He said: "Do not spill [innocent] blood!"' Reuven entertained the possibility that Yosef's dreams contained prophetic

14. *Yalkut* Vaychi 158

omens. If so, how could the brothers conspire to upset Heaven's design? A poignant question: Can man derail Divine desire? *ludicrous…*

Murmurs of dissent arose from these self-appointed sheriffs. The impassioned advocacy stayed the execution but did not go far enough to assuage some zealous brothers' desire for a severe reprimand for Yosef's crimes. Sending Yosef off scot-free was never tabled. Reuven persisted, moving the talks in the direction of an alternative remedial action. 'And Reuven said to them: "Throw him in this desert pit and let not a hand strike him."' Trial-by-ordeal removed an impasse since the key issue hinged on this: Should Yosef *and* his dreams (if dreams they *were*) be allowed a second chance? Dotan had abundant pits so Reuven suggested using one for Yosef's test. If he emerged alive, so be it. If he succumbed to the elements and died there, then at least they would not be directly implicated. One pre-condition was that no one was to cast stones at Yosef.

The Torah testifies that Reuven's goal was far nobler than these terse hollow-sounding snippets. He viewed the temporary lockup 'for the purpose of saving him from their hands and returning him to his father.' Plainly, he intended to facilitate Yosef's escape. What better way, Reuven thought, is there to regain Yaakov's trust after the Bilhah affair than to save his father's favorite son?

Third *aliyah*

'When Yosef came to his brothers they stripped Yosef of his special coat – the special coat that he had been wearing.'

Obviously unaware of their diabolical decisions, Yosef approached his accusers. They hastened to administer the test and trial. After removing his special coat 'they grabbed him, throwing him into an empty pit holding no water.' Had the pit contained water, Yosef's end would inevitably be death by drowning. A pretty dorky experiment.

As it was, the deed's cruelty can scarcely be described in words. Incredibly, 'they sat to eat a meal.' Nine brothers, excluding Reuven (Yosef and Binyamin) participated. Their eating was interrupted by activity they saw in the horizon. 'They looked and saw Yishmaelite caravans approaching from Gilead.' On account of the road traveled and the nature of their particular merchandise, the brothers presumed the caravan's identity. Likely, they were Yishmaelite porters who dominated the trade and transport of gum, balsam,

and resin from the Gilead artery to Egypt. When they got closer, the brothers recognized the detailed identifying marks. In fact, these shippers hailed from a Midianite tribe within the greater Yishmaelite nation.

Cogitating, Yehudah had found fatal flaws in Reuven's plan. The appeal and reopening of the trial proceedings assumed urgent proportions. The Midianites, too gave Yehuda pause. He extemporized. 'And Yehudah said to his brothers: "What profit accrues by killing our brother and covering his blood? Let's sell him to the Yishmaelites and not lay our hand on him, for he is our brother and flesh."' The provisional verdict lacked logic. Miracles cannot be conjured up on demand. Elaborating, he explained that starving Yosef in a hole proves nothing. The dry, barren recesses or driving desert storms would kill him before the test commenced.

Yehudah asserted that killing Yosef served no purpose. Not one of the three main motives for taking a person's life applied:

- Stealing the victim's money or valuables
- Destroying sworn enemies or bitter adversaries
- An honor motivated duello

Reviewing these verses, they read: No material gain – 'What profit accrues?' No enmity and revenge – 'He is our brother and flesh.' No prestige – 'covering his blood?'

'His brothers agreed.' Returning to the dream predicament, Yehudah persuaded his brothers that selling Yosef offered the fairest terms. If Yosef's dreams truly portended an elevated rank, he would climb out of slavery's hole, too. If they were flights of fancy, then Yosef was, as it were, sunk at the other end of sovereignty's spectrum. As if raising his arms to the heavens, Yehudah invoked Divine intervention. He deferred to the Almighty as if to say: The matter is in Hashem's court, come what may. No sooner had a camel caravan lumbered into their camp, the brothers 'pulled and lifted Yosef from the pit. And Yosef was sold to the Yishmaelites for twenty silver talents.' The pittance sale proceeds support the proposition that this deal was not about turning profit. Going human cargo rate far exceeded that sum. The transaction did, however, provide ample time and space to give Yehudah's proposal a chance.

The Torah does not say where Reuven had been. 'And Reuven returned to the pit. Yosef was not in the pit. And he rent his garments.' His reaction assumed the worst. Did wild animals kill Yosef? Did his brothers? In a state

of profound shock he mumbled under his breath. 'The lad is gone. And where am I [safe]?' Paralysis gripped Yaakov's oldest son. If his brothers could kill innocent Yosef today, why not lay their murderous hands on him tomorrow?

Reuven did learn the truth but it offered zero solace. His hopes of returning Yosef and restoring his father's trust and good graces never did see light of day. He may have watched the caravan pull further away into a darkening horizon before disappearing altogether – and with it his dream.

The conspirators turned their attention to their father. How would the news be broken? Vowing silence, the brothers' nefarious crime would remain locked shut. 'They took Yosef's special coat; slaughtered a goat; doused the special coat in goat's blood. They slashed the special coat.' Blood-drenched and "tooth-shredded" material made concocted evidence.

As if absorbed in mourning, the brothers entered their father's home gingerly bearing Yosef's *kaputte*. 'They brought it to their father. They said: "We found this. Can you identify whether this is your son's special coat – or not?"' Examining the once-special but now stringy frock the old patriarch conceded. 'He recognized it and said: "Coat – *my son* has been devoured by a savage beast. But was *Yosef* completely consumed?"' Yaakov understood that if only a coat remained, a vicious predator must have ravaged the flesh and bones. It left grisly leftovers. One detail, though, did not fit. What animal gulps down an entire human being – minus a coat? Were there no signs whatsoever of his son's body parts? As if speaking in an undertone to Yosef's coat, he beseeched it: COAT! TELL ME! How could my Yosef be gone? Even if you tell me that *my* merit and sacrifice did not suffice, still *Yosef*'s merits should have protected him from such fate. Something is so terribly… *amiss*.

'Yaakov rent his garments in mourning, put on sackcloth and sat in protracted mourning *for his son*.' There were two distinct aspects of the pain that racked the patriarch: Loss of his son, per se, and the bereavement of unparalleled Yosef, in particular. Fathers do not die *after* their children. Losing a son – any son – is an unnatural reversal. Children are meant, nearly ordained, to bury their elders. Also Yosef, despite his youth, was a powerhouse. His premature passing deprived society of an individual poised to make a meaningful and positive mark in a wide context. The Torah informs us that the initial dominant emotion was the former. Rent garments, sackcloth and prolonged mourning are the fate of any bereaved father. Empathetically the

Sages recognized this indescribable agony. They taught[15] that under such circumstances bereavement brings comprehensive Divine forgiveness. A complete upending of the natural order suffices to wipe sins' slate clean. Yaakov was inconsolable and according to tradition remained that way for the duration of his son's twenty-two year absence.[16]

'And all of his sons and daughters rose to comfort him however he refused to be consoled. He asserted: "I will mourn until my dying day."' Nothing salved his gash and open wound. As time wore on, his constant moaning and crying over his son unsettled the siblings. Yaakov carried on as if he had no surviving children.

Yet one who is fortunate enough to have other kids ought not to grieve excessively over the deceased. Jewish tradition caps mourning practices.[17] Ominous threats warn excessive mourners. It may foreshadow disaster for the remaining family members. For the sake of his living sons and daughters-in-law could their father not, in a manner of speaking, square his shoulders? Alas, nothing worked. Yaakov shut out his family's attempts at consolation. 'He said, "I have to go mourn over my son's grave!?"'

Yaakov may have meant something else. "Do I have a grave over which to mourn my son?" When his family and friends redoubled their efforts for a return to normalcy and measured mourning, Yaakov blankly stared: *Does Yosef have a normal gravesite, a quiet place where I can sit and grieve in full?* His response reflected the torment of a man burying his teenager. The patriarch had checked out, it could be said, from among the living.

A very long period elapsed, and somehow the gaping hole in Yaakov's heart over losing his son became only minimally manageable. He then slid emotional gears and pondered the devastating curtailment of Yosef's potential life story. No one had appreciated Yosef's far-reaching abilities as much as Yaakov. 'And his father cried *over him*.' He had recognized, nay chosen him, for outstanding achievement. Yosef's death put embers, as it were, over empires sketched but not yet built. The Sages[18] identified Yitzchak as the one crying over his son as Yaakov's heartbreaking predicament deeply touched him.

Some commentators attribute Yaakov's perpetual mourning to his fear of heaven. He believed he was Divinely enjoined to mourn incessantly. Why?

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15. BT *Berachot* 5b
16. *Bereshit Rabbah* 98:20
17. BT *Moed Katan* 27b
18. *Bereshit Rabbah* 84:21

As the patriarch probed deeper in self-reflection and touched his psyche's bedrock, an agonizingly reflective question surfaced. Had *he* caused it? Was it *his* fault? If the answer was yes, then this calamity would be his last. He would cry over it until his dying day. Hashem would not have to grant more occasion for mourning as a wakeup call. Each tear, then, functioned as his family's undergirding. Iyyov[19] said as much: 'If I say: "I will forget my complaint, I will put off my sad countenance, and be of good cheer," I am afraid of all my pains, I know that you will not hold me guiltless.'

Yaakov, surrounded by his sympathetic family, tearfully grieved alone. 'And his father cried.'

The above are solid attempts at rationalizing Yaakov's behavior. To be sure, they go far, but nevertheless fall short. At heart, there was something – a final thread – needed to give the first four reasons truly proper, if metaphysical, perspective. To understand it, a preface is in order.

Cosmological phenomena are mirrored by pivotal movers of Jewish destiny, as follows:

A grand heavenly gear affecting all galactic movement, operated, so to speak by the Almighty Himself	Avraham was propelled to greatness by Hashem's direct prodding
A malach operates a heavenly gear hosting the twelve zodiac signs	Yitzchak fathered Yaakov who had the twelve tribes (hence eleven stars in Yosef's dream)
The sun is flanked by Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars at one side, and Venus, Mercury, and the moon on the other	Moshe Rabbeinu is preceded by Levi, Kehat, and Amram. He is followed by Aharon,[20] David, and Shlomoh
Myriads of stars with varying brightness intensity	Prophets and Sages shine throughout millennia[21]

Given that preface, Yaakov's behavior makes sense. If one integral component of his twelve tribes died, it foreshadowed a Jewish Nation's deformity while

19. *Iyyov* 9:27–28
20. Apparently, despite their birth order, Moshe precedes Aharon due to the former's supreme prophetic status. Cf. the order of the Succot *ushpizin*, where Moshe precedes Aharon according to all customs.
21. See *Daniyel* 12:3 and *Devarim* 1:10

spelling their universal demise.[22] He could not find solace because there is no coming to grips with apocalypse and holocaust. *Disequilibrium.*

The patriarch counted his sons *eleven* and saw something grotesque, bent his ear but heard a cacophony. In the patriarch's mindset, it was not merely that one son was missing, but rather everyone and everything was gone. His house, now no more than a rickety house of cards, tottered. Smashed was the foundation, an entire world's bedrock. The immutability of the Jewish Nation's basic constitution has been acknowledged in *Sefer Shoftim*,[23] as well as by the prophets Eliyahu,[24] Yeshayahu,[25] Yirmiyahu[26] and Daniyel.[27] In order for Jewish nationhood to exist, let alone thrive, its spiritual dimension cannot be altered any more than the eternal solar system.

Yaakov lost all semblance of his former self. Remaining was only a comprehensive belief system in tattered threads – the bloodied threads of a coat once so special.

For twenty-two years, Yaakov would not experience an ounce of prophecy. The revival of the man and his spirit came only when his children told him that Yosef was still alive.[28]

Five points summarize Yaakov's inconsolability:

- Paternal Loss
- Funeral Farce
- The Demise of Incomparable Yosef
- Heavenly Dread
- Metaphysical Rupture

'And the Midianites sold him to the Egyptians (and eventually to) to Paroah's Executioner.' What an anomaly. Yaakov cried, as it were, over a dead son while Yosef embarked on a sumptuous palace life surrounded by opulence and luxury.

§§§

22. See *Shmot* 28:29 for the expansion of the microcosm theme of twelve vis-à-vis the *mishcan* and the *kohen gadol*'s breastplate.
23. See *Shoftim* 21:1-4.
24. See *Melachim* I 18:21
25. *Yeshayahu* 66:22
26. *Yirmiyahu* 31:34
27. See Abravanel's *Maaynei Hayeshuah* 12:2:3 s.v. הסבה השלישית
28. See chapter eleven, fourth *aliyah*

Another fundamental topic precedes the fourth *aliyah*. Yosef's brothers' egregious crime has been described above. It is peculiar that no mention was made of their Divine punishment. Did Heaven grant clemency to the disgraced tribe members? Consider something even more problematic. Since Yaakov and his family had been decreed to descend to Egypt's exile, was this incomprehensible deed anything more than robotically following Divine design?[29]

Such superficial understanding fails to account for a fundamental tenet of Judaism: Free Choice. The ultimate triumph of Hashem's plan is a foregone conclusion. It cannot be altered. Therefore, when Hashem forecasted an Egyptian exile, perforce there has to be one. Here is the rub.

Divine plans do not have any particular or single course of action. Many potential avenues lead to the desired end goal. Hence, free choice can and does enter the equation. While it is axiomatic that Yaakov would end up in Egypt, it was not decreed that the brothers had to act as agents – especially not reprehensible ones. Nothing precluded, for example, Yaakov's exile resulting solely from local pestilence or drought. With regards to Yosef's brothers' punishment see *Parashat Lech Lecha*[30] and *Parashat Vayigash*.[31]

Fourth *aliyah*

'At around that time Yehudah retreated from his brothers, and he befriended a man from Adulam whose name was Chirah.'

Although some commentators[32] assert that Yehudah left home before Yosef's sale, the consensus is that it occurred after, and as a result of it. The Torah abruptly interrupts Yosef's saga with Yehudah's episode for three reasons.

- Yosef and Yehudah's narratives foreshadow two future Jewish kingdoms. Yosef's descendants ruled the Northern Kingdom after a split from King David's Yehuda descendants.[33] Yosef married an Egyptian princess and this ancestral flaw effectively disqualified Yosef's descendants from permanent reign over Israel. By contrast, Yehudah's wife

29. See chapter three, sixth *aliyah*
30. Ibid.
31. Chapter eleven, second *aliyah*
32. *Ibn Ezra* and *Ralbag*
33. See *Melachim* I 11 and the following chapter.

Tamar cemented that tribe's legitimacy for all time.[34] In addition to her own admirable character, Tamar's noblesse is traced through Shem, her father.[35] Yehudah's story of successfully establishing enduring royal bloodlines precedes Yosef's failure in that regard.

- This interjection is an immediate aftermath of Yosef's sale. Yehudah separated from his brothers because of their fratricidal bloodlust. It was only his masterful, vigorous counterpoint that had stayed all but certain execution. Undeniably, his father's moribundity compounded issues and swayed Yehudah to pack up. Seeing Yaakov virtually comatose weighed heavily upon him. It would, however, be incorrect to say that Yehudah abandoned Yaakov. He remained a dutiful son and was fully attentive to his father's needs, even joining his brothers to buy Egyptian grain.[36] Only now he deemed separation judicious. His alienation from his wayward brothers prompted him to move away.
- Before placing Yosef in full limelight for the balance of *Sefer Bereshit,* this diversion and narrative underscores the supernatural Divine protection of Yaakov's family – despite Yosef's cruel sale. A population increase is normally concomitant with natural reduction factors like child mortality, plague,or disease. Yaakov's children and grandchildren were spared this fate. Providence kept watch. The current passage serves to explain an anomaly in the perfect patriarchal family portrait. Yehudah's two sons did die prematurely but these verses are explicit that it had nothing to do with their father's complicity in Yosef's sale. Their death reflected immorality's consequences. Even so, Divine favor, in a manner of speaking, repaid Yehudah when Tamar bore him righteous twins.

The phrase 'Yehudah *retreated* (*'vayered'*) from his brothers' intimates that Yehudah's fraternizing with Chirah was a steep plummet vis-à-vis the social milieu in comparison to the former patriarchic family camaraderie. 'And Yehudah saw the daughter of a *Cenaani* man named Shua there and married her.' The man was either descended from Canaan, which would go a long

34. See *Yeshayahu* 11:1 et al
35. *Bereshit Rabbah* 85:10
36. See chapter ten, fourth *aliyah* ff.

way in explaining his wayward grandchildren, or the word "*cenaani*" means "merchant." The Hebrew meaning of Shua's name implies generosity. Perhaps Yehudah had been tempted by his father-in-law's magnanimous dowry. Although the Torah does not seem to refer to Yehudah's wife by name, dubbing her the 'daughter of Shua'[37] it is likely that her proper name was Bat-Shua (similar in construct to Bat-Sheva) which means "daughter of Shua."

Their marriage produced three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Often in *Tanach* and quite unintentionally parents gave names that foreshadow the Almighty's guiding hand. Yehudah's sons are good indicators. Customarily a father names the firstborn, his wife the second, and the father the third son.[38] The Hebrew term *"Er"* bears two meanings. Yehudah intended Er's name to reflect "*awakening*" – praying that he be of energetic nature, and fend off lethargy. Heaven viewed the baby differently. *Er* is also an abbreviated form of an adjective meaning barren or childless (*ariri*). Indeed, he ambled waywardly, led a nondescript and empty life. Er died childless after a short marriage. Bat-Shua named their next son *Onan*, derived from "*On*" – *strength*, hoping to empower him. Sadly, a good idea was lost on him. *Onen* also means *mourning* (*lehitonen*). Pain and misery snuffed out his truncated, tragic life. When a third child came along, Yehudah was out of town 'in Kezeev when she delivered.' That is why the mother though strictly speaking out of order, took the liberty of naming son number three Shelah. Shelah connoted *shalom* meaning *peace*, but can also suggest disappointment. Jilted from a levirate marriage, Tamar might aptly have described her brother-in-law that way.

Quite literally, a dead end is where Yehudah and Bat-Shua's family was headed. 'And Yehudah took a wife whose name was Tamar for Er his oldest.' Due to his misbehavior, 'he was evil in Hashem's eyes, and Hashem brought his demise.' Er's sin remains vague. Tradition paints him as an overly doting, distracted husband. Determined to maintain his wife's figure, he prevented her pregnancy by means of *coitus interruptus*.[39] Birth control would best preserve her youthful beauty. Reprehensible at any rate by Noahide Laws,[40] this transgression assumed especially heinous proportions because Hashem

37. See *Bereshit* 38:12
38. Abravanel interjects that this custom persisted until his own time.
39. BT *Yevamot* 34b
40. Cf. Chapter eight, footnote 30 above. Abravanel views procreation, although not included in the Seven Noahide Laws, as a Divine imperative for non-Jews as well. Cf. BT *Sanhedrin* 59b.

desired boosting Yaakov's progeny's population destined to inherit Canaan. Harsh and swift Divine measures emphasized His displeasure when any of the Chosen People shirked responsibility. The Four-Letter Ineffable Name of Hashem connoting mercy is utilized here. Hashem, as it were, cringed at the disservice done to Avraham's family, all united in the commitment to increasing its size.

'And Yehudah instructed Onan: "Marry your brother's wife through levirate marriage and establish your brother's seed."' Versed in ancient levirate marriage principles, Yehudah urged his son to wed Tamar. Onan pantingly desired Tamar but emphatically did not want any part of the levirate concept. 'He knew that the seed would not truly be his (in a spiritual and mystical sense)' but a replacement for Er. As Er incarnate, the child would essentially be, not his son, but rather his brother. Onan therefore mistakenly thought that he was exempt from Noahide procreation precepts. When he and Tamar had sexual intercourse, Onan withdrew at climax. Niggardly, he adamantly refused to participate in Er's token and nominal eternity. Summarily, Hashem hastened his death for the same reasons as Er's.

Rationally Yehudah could pin the premature deaths on childish, impetuous, and unbridled passion. Escorting her back to her parent's home, he tenderly voiced his concerns to Tamar. 'And Yehudah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar: "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up."' Under the circumstances, it simply was not feasible to allow pre-teen Shelah to marry her. Yehudah did give his word that when the lad matured, they would wed. He said and believed that an older, wiser and disciplined Shelah could reasonably perform levirate marriage with aplomb.

That *shidduch* did not happen. Instead, seemingly disparate factors brought Yehudah and his daughter-in-law together:

- Tamar widely underestimated Yehudah's sincerity. After some years passed, she mistook Shelah for being considerably older than his ten years of age. She attributed the delayed matrimony to her father-in-law's stonewalling. Tamar suspected that Yehudah harbored doubts regarding Tamar's character and feared her to be a black widow *katlanit*.[41]
- 'In time Yehudah's wife Bat-Shua passed away. After Yehudah had been consoled, he attended his flock's shearing festivities [in the city of]

41. See BT *Yevamot* 64b

Timna – he and his Adulamite companion.' Alone, he missed healthy marital relations and began looking for female company.

- With his mourning period over, he participated in a county livestock fair. A sense of normalcy returned. Vibrant, joyous fairgrounds lifted his sunken spirits. Fraternizing with Chirah his old buddy and mingling with others invigorated him. His lust for life was back. He had not experienced such zest since his wife's passing.

Tamar, it seems, was still biding her time when she learned of Yehudah's bash. 'And it was told to Tamar: "Look here. Your father-in-law is coming to Timna to shear his flocks."' Weary of a widow's solitude with no end in sight, she plotted a change – on her terms. 'She removed her drab widow's garments, veiled and wrapped herself.' The plan assumed Yehudah would see but not fully recognize her on account of what she wore. 'She sat waiting at the Timna highway junction.' She counted on being noticed by Yehudah since the conspicuous location was observable from the city. Here is where her mind shot, if you will, for the moon. Tamar fantasized that when Yehudah saw her he would ask for her company at the fair, fall in love, and marry her.

Things did not quite turn out that way. Erring on the side of modesty, Tamar covered herself up – too much. A rendezvous did take place but under a very different guise. Not recognizing Tamar, Yehudah assumed she was a call girl! Quickly catching on to the awkward gaffe, she played along with her suitor's bids. Her manner henceforth would suggest that she was familiar in that role, so Yehudah suspected nothing of her true identity. 'And she said: "How much will you pay for my services?"' Tamar, apparently familiar with the way of the world, did not want payment. That is, not just yet. She calculated that a maximum compensation would be forthcoming if it would be delayed, accepting security in the form of Yehudah's three customized and personalized items – his signet ring, handkerchief, and staff. Soon enough, this ironclad evidence would prove pivotal.

Tamar's thinking has to be explained. This young and attractive woman, the scion of the illustrious Shem/Malki-Tzedek knew exactly what she wanted to accomplish. This was no floozy, and definitely no harlot. Precisely because of her aristocratic background, she determinedly wanted entree into Yehudah's family. Levirate marriage laws did not necessarily limit her to Shelah. If her brother-in-law failed to perform this kindness, then next in line, her

father-in-law was an adequate substitute. She had lived under Yehudah's roof and knew that he was a worthy man, recently widowed.

But was Tamar acting morally? Was her bar-no-holds approach kosher? A tricky but accurate guideline applies. If an individual has noble intent and honestly wants to do the right thing, then even if the method looks to the world as base or compromising, that act is justified – even praiseworthy. Heaven promises great reward for it.[42] As for Yehudah, recall our remarks with reference to Dinah.[43] Post-Torah values forbid frequenting brothels,[44] but prior to Mt. Sinai's Lawgiving, Yehudah must be judged by Noahide standards.[45] Assuming that, it fell within Yehudah's confines and prerogative to consort with a prostitute.[46]

'And it was three months later that Yehudah was informed that his daughter-in-law Tamar was unfaithful and pregnant with illegitimate children.' Sexual intercourse with anyone outside the family circle, when awaiting levirate marriage, is an attenuated form of adultery. Practically cavalier, Tamar had not the slightest compunction about her slightly salient pregnancy and belly.

Harshly and unhesitatingly, Yehudah presided over her docket. 'And Yehudah said: "Take her out and burn her."' He found her guilty of a capital offense since levirate ties bound her as a married woman. Adultery carried the maximum punishment. Yehudah handed down the sentence with little ado. Was it not an open and shut case?

In the ancient world's legal system, cuckolded husbands adjudicated and sentenced wives for infidelity. Tamar's levirate wife status conferred this discretion to Yehudah. His judicial purview, then, devolved upon him not as a federal or circuit judge, but rather as the head of an offended household. According to the Sages,[47] Tamar's lineage to Malki-Tzedek, a *kohen* to the Almighty warranted the decision's particular severity – death by burning.[48]

At her trial, Tamar offered an unorthodox defense. Her paunch precluded outright denial and her integrity quashed claims of rape or extenuating circumstances. Before being dragged to the pyre, she submitted three pieces of evidence for Yehudah to review. 'She said to her father-in-law: "Identify to

42. Cf. Ruth's behavior in *Rut* 3
43. See chapter eight, fifth *aliyah*
44. *Devarim* 28:18
45. See chapter eight, footnote 30
46. See *Moreh Nevuchim* III:49
47. *Bereshit Rabbah* 25:10
48. See *Vayikra* 21:9

whom these signet, handkerchief, and staff belong."' Her paramour was the owner of these things.

Tamar's pithy statements hammered away at a key point of law. She argued that in cases of infidelity, fair law dictates that an equal fate awaits the lover and mistress. She let Yehudah call the final shot. No one at the court was privy to the facts enabling the evidence's import besides the presiding judge. She looked at Yehudah as if to say, "Your court. Your honor?"

Yehudah looked closely at his personal effects, mentally replaying the events leading up to their transfer to Tamar. The Torah does not say whether the trial was open to the public and if so, how the viewers reacted to the shocking and abrupt turn of events. Even harder to gauge was what Yehudah thought when confronted with the hard evidence. But at least one thing is certain. It did not take long to deliberate. 'She is far more in the right than I am. Therefore I did not give her my son Shelah to wed.'

What did Yehudah intend to do with this? One approach is that as in all landmark cases – public or private – this one screamed loudly for justice. Yehudah examined and analyzed the issues:

NOAHIDE COURT CASE #002

People (on behalf of Yehudah ben Yaakov) v. Tamar bat Shem

Facts:

- Yehudah slept with his daughter-in-law.
- Tamar had relations with her father-in-law.

Mitigating Factors:

- Tamar initiated and had foreknowledge whereas Yehudah did not. (A point in Yehudah's favor.)
- Tamar's motive had been pure. Levirate marriage's lofty goal, at heart, honors the dead. (One for Tamar.)

VERDICT

THIS COURT FINDS IN FAVOR OF TAMAR BAT SHEM.
HER ACT WAS INGENIOUSLY PREMEDITATED
WITH RIGHTEOUS MOTIVE AND PURE INTENT.
YEHUDAH BEN YAAKOV ACTED ON IMPULSIVE DESIRE.

Yehudah exclaimed that Tamar's wisdom and piety was cause for keeping Shelah away from her. Shelah's puerile foolishness was no match for her intellect and moral excellence.

A second approach to this verse reads Yehudah admitting his concerns over a levirate marriage to Shelah. He had indeed worried that she was at fault for the successive failures at conceiving and her spouses' demise. Her current pregnancy, brought about with such purity of intent, laid his fears to rest. Her insistence that Yehudah's sons had only themselves to blame was wholly accurate.

According to the Sages,[49] the two never lived together again. 'And it occurred that when she delivered, they were twins.' Providentially, the single encounter produced twins, as it were, to replace Er and Onen. Tamar's upright motives produced Peretz and Zerach. In the future Peretz's line led to King David.[50] *Mashiach* descends directly from Yehudah and Tamar. Their mark on the world had been presaged. Nothing will or can alter Hashem's immutable will. Since the stage has been set for the primary Davidic dynasty, the Torah can now turn to Yosef – the progenitor of secondary royal families.

Fifth *aliyah*

'And Yosef was taken down to Egypt. Egyptian Potifar, Paroah's chief executioner, had bought him from the Yishmaelites who had transported him down to Egypt.'

Captured and shackled as chattel, Yosef had been bundled off to Egypt. Human cargo. All things considered his slavery could have been much worse. Had Providence not intervened, he might have landed a cameleer position, traipsing desert sands and storms for the rest of his life. Or perhaps some unsavory slave-trafficker might have dragged Yosef to Timbuktu. Yaakov's beloved son could have ended up cleaning latrines in a souk. Instead fortune brought him to Egypt, Canaan's southern neighbor and host to an ancient culture with amenities. Moreover his new owner, Potifar, was a man of means with a respected position in Paroah's court. His title (*saris*) connotes nobility or a cabinet minister. Potifar held the internal security ministry portfolio, heading the police and state detention centers.

49. Sifrei Beha'alotcha 88. Cf. BT Sotah 10b
50. See *Rut* 4:18–22

Despite Yosef's captivity, he remained true to Yaakov's family values and maintained his virtue. Hashem repaid him with astounding success. Providence, indeed, guarded him in three distinct ways. Note Hashem's kindness:

- Unlike slaves' general degradation and dejection, Yosef's spirits were buoyed. He did not only tread water; he flourished. At the end of the *parashah* this is manifested through his superhuman dream analytics acumen. 'Hashem was with Yosef.'
- A finder of solutions and fixer, he rapidly acquired a can-do reputation. 'He was a successful man.'
- His fast-track promotion and career advancement. Unlike other foreign slaves delegated to menial farmhand work, Yosef gained employment inside his master's household. Another anomaly. Hebrews, even at that time, were an anathema to Egyptians who kept strict vegetarian dietary habits. Potifar overlooked Yosef's differences. 'He was in his Egyptian master's house.'

Potifar observed that Yosef was not a typical, wheeler-dealer Canaanite intent on making money through lying, deceit, and fraud. Yosef was honest. Additionally he could not help but take stock of this worker's magical touch and work ethic. No task fazed or even discouraged him. Gradually his admiration and trust moved Yosef higher, if you will, up the corporate ladder. Initially Yosef's employment was restricted to the workplace as Potifar drew a clear line between his home and office.

Things changed quickly, specifically in three new arenas:

- *Personal Valet* 'And Yosef found favor in his eyes and he served him.' A proper gentleman's gentleman. Potifar consulted Yosef on matters concerning dress and dining.
- *Chief Estate Administrator* All domestic staff reported to him. 'And he placed him in charge of his household.'
- *Chief Financial Officer* Comptroller Yosef managed and oversaw Potifar's considerable wealth. 'Whatever he owned, he gave over to Yosef's supervision.'

And his wealth grew more considerable. 'Hashem's grace blessed the Egyptian's household on account of Yosef.' Potifar's pot of gold shone beyond imagination.

Yosef's mere presence on the staff rippled 'blessing to all Potifar had at home and in the field.' The more *gelt* rolled in, the more the boss took a back seat. His trust and reliance on Yosef were implicit. It got to the point where he did not bother to ask Yosef for receipts, invoices, or any other accepted business accountability or verification practices.

One area was *verboten*. Potifar could not abide Yosef sharing a meal with him as it says 'except for the bread that he ate.' The man who ran Potifar's everything, it seems, ate alone. Indeed, Egyptians took their vegetarian and culinary quirks to extremes.

For a slave barely off the boat, life must have looked pretty enticing. 'And Yosef was extremely handsome and well-built.' People started to take notice.

Sixth *aliyah*

'And it was after these things that his master's wife cast her eyes beseechingly upon Yosef. She said: "Lie with me."'

Yosef wore his achievements well. Actually, too well. 'Yosef was extremely handsome and well-built.' Celebrity enhanced Yosef's mystique on top of his naturally good looks, talent and panache, and Potifar's wife became distracted. Hot passion turned obsessive and finally spun out of control. When her desire for him derailed reason, she pinned Yosef down. She took the position that since he conquered the household, he might as well conquer her. "I am all yours, take me to bed."

Yosef turned the possessed housewife down flat. 'And he refused saying to his master's wife: "My master has turned over everything to me, except you, his wife. How can I do this serious offense and sin to the Almighty?"' In Yosef's mind, adultery with the boss's wife was out of the question. Impregnating her so that she could give birth and raise pagan progeny also nixed things. But Yosef pushed her off for other reasons, too.

He told her that, in general, a man loses self-control for specific reasons. However in Yosef's case, he already had all that he needed as far as prestige, honor, and esteem. 'My master has no idea what goes on in the household. It is all under my direction.' In a sense, Yosef flipped his suitor's arguments. That is, since he effectively ruled Potifar's domain, there was no need to conquer further. 'No one is more powerful than I in this household. My master has

turned over everything to me, except you, his wife.' Rhetorically he asked her if I take you, what will Potifar have left? To her promise to keep an affair secret he explained. 'How can I do this serious offense and sin to the Almighty?' Judaism 101: Hashem sees all.

Daily, Potifar's wife put the pass on Yosef. The problem grated. Initially when her intentions became known, Yosef tried communicating. Basic courtesy toward an employer's wife dictated as much. But when her offers came hot and heavy – day in and day out – Yosef avoided contact with her. The Sages[51] learned that this tactic worked for twelve months. It was well beyond awkward. Things turned unbearable. Yosef's religious background had a steady undergirding, but constant temptation wears a person down. The best course, Yosef determined, entailed total separation. Otherwise her seductive perfumes, clothing and allure just might ensnare him.

Her boldness knew no bounds. Scantily dressed and heavily scented, her arms pointing to rich oriental rugs and silk sheets she said 'Just lie down. Be here with me.' Resting, she said, is harmless enough. What is wrong with talking? 'And he did not listen to her offer to keep her company.' Seeing that Potifar's wife did not get the message he plugged his ears and kept his distance.

At this juncture, Yosef would neither speak to her nor listen to her ideas. Self-evident is that he would not share her divan. Frustrated at every turn, she spurned discretion, taking radical measures. He would be hers – regardless. Yosef had no idea what lay in store for him the next time he came to work.

'And it was on that day that he came to the house to attend work. No household staff was in the house.' Potifar's wife, an aroused cougar, came out of her skin, unglued. Flooded with burning hot passion she hunted Yosef down. 'She ripped off his clothes…"MAKE LOVE TO ME."' Fearing contagion from this lust-crazed lioness, 'he left her holding his clothes…made a mad dash, split, and ran out.' He would not risk taking his cloak for fear of an overt physical advance, and did not grab it and run on account of being her subordinate. Outside, he sighed with relief.

Inside flushed and stranded, Potifar's wife realized that Yosef was gone and was not coming back. She held his clothes, wondering: What good would they do her? Yosef, undressed and long-gone, did not bode well for her. To

51. *Tanchuma Vayeshev* 8

be sure, it wasn't exactly a boon for him either. Should he be spotted running outside to his living quarters, how would stately and modest Yosef explain his darting around practically naked to his co-workers, let alone to Potifar, his boss? Insufferable.

Mrs. Potifar's dilemma was no less daunting. If this story got out, and get out it would, very likely, a cheated husband would show little patience for a loose, wealthy wench. She knew that her life hung by a thread, so she wove a net for Yosef and cast it when her husband came home that night.

First came the dress rehearsal. 'And she called to her servants saying to them: "See how this Hebrew knave mocks us? He came to rape me. I screamed!"' They heard how her husband invited trouble into her house. Of all foreign workers, he chose to employ a detestable, meat-eating Hebrew national. Potifar's wife alleged sexual assault, near rape, alerting help. Calming Her Highness down, her attendants asked how she managed to fend him off. They were told that her protests frightened him away. One suspects that they probably did not see her face expressing deep satisfaction as they examined the incriminating evidence – Yosef's clothes.

With the servants comforting madam and offering to take away this scoundrel's robes, Potifar's wife insisted that it would not be necessary. 'And she kept his clothes until his master came back home.' Now came the live performance. Fooling naïve lackeys is one thing, fooling her husband who had worked with and seen Yosef up close with an unimpeachable record was something else altogether.

Potifar came home to a distraught prima donna, outlandish blather, and Yosef's frock. 'And she spoke to him in this manner saying: "The Hebrew slave came to me, the one you brought to us, in order to fool around with me."' After hearing her version, Potifar spoke with Yosef (though the Torah does not record it) and quickly formed his impressions. Shady pictures emerged – mostly framed. A scandal it wasn't, a big headache it was.

After reviewing all the soft allegations, cold facts and hard evidence, Potifar concluded that there were no grounds for accepting his wife's fable and the concomitant execution demand. Yosef's defense, along with his solid character, rang true. 'When his master heard his wife's words that she spoke to him saying: "Like this he your servant did to me," he got frustrated.' He was

not angry at Yosef. He was irritated with his wife's constant nagging. *Dear, you simply* must *take care of that carnivorous Canaanite cad.*

The problem rested with finding a delicate mix that would accomplish conflicting demands. In brief, here was the conundrum. If Potifar acquitted Yosef it would give his wife license to sleep around freely. He had to accept the tenor of her claims. On the other hand, a guilty verdict and the execution of an innocent man who capably and honestly ran government posts and family affairs would be a mortal, self-inflicting wound. With the goal of stalling until this teacup storm subsided, a compromise presented itself.

'Potifar accompanied Yosef to the political offender prison wing.' It appeared as a punishment, to be sure, but really it was artfully crafted to accomplish a high-profile slap on Yosef's wrist. The white-collar conditions were not a boutique hotel but a far cry from a dungeon. Potifar kept tabs on Yosef and in fact, employed him as the onsite jail supervisor. The formal term of the sentence was ambiguous. 'Yosef was placed there' until further notice.

'And Hashem was with Yosef, gracing him. The prison inspector looked upon him favorably.' Despite being callous from years of dealing with a whole array of cons, thieves, and criminals, soon the chief went uncharacteristically soft and handed Yosef the site's reins. This was a manifestly miraculous development.

Henceforth Yosef ran the whole operation. Practically, that meant he functioned as the parole officer, deciding when and if prisoners and visitors come and go. Insofar as inmates' bartering carried on with an outside world, there was the risk of escape. Yosef earned the prisoners' trust and they paid him for middleman services, negotiating deals. 'That which they intended to do, Yosef did (for them).' Likely he profited from his moonlighting. The inspector knew but did not care. 'The police chief did not see anything under his supervision because Hashem was with him. The Almighty brought him fabulous success.' Yosef's boss saw but turned a blind eye to his prison shenanigans due to jobs performed flawlessly.

Seventh *aliyah*

'And it was after these things that the king's drink attendant and the baker sinned against their master, the King of Egypt.'

The unrecorded charges may have been revolutionary or conspiratorial. 'And Paroah vented his wrath at the two head ministers: the Minister of Drink and Minister of Cuisine. He placed them in the Internal Minister's detention where Yosef had been incarcerated.'

Understand the administrative protocol as follows: A head minister personally served Paroah during formal state events while an officer directly underneath him was entrusted to provide the day-to-day private royal dining needs. In this way, the minister bore responsibility, as department director, to find trustworthy professionals to do excellent work. The assistant *chef de cuisine* and vice-executive viticulturist worked under these two respective ministers, but the buck stopped with the ministers themselves.

Vulnerable and high profile Egyptian government officials thus came under attack and a head-rolling appeared imminent. While Yosef steadily built his reputation, two of the *brigade de cuisine* in charge of Paroah's royal kitchen were found guilty of aggravated misconduct and sent to the prison's political wing under Yosef's ward. (As for the small fry underlings? Presumably they were summarily executed and unworthy of mention.) The government *brigade de cuisine* officials sat in detainment pending deliberation. The Sages[52] calculated their prison term as a full year. Yosef provided them with comfortable accommodations.

'One night the two ministers in custody – Paroah's Drink and Cuisine Ministers – dreamt. Yosef came to them in the morning, noticing that they were visibly shaken. And he asked Paroah's ministers who were with him in his master's ward saying: "Why are you both so sullen today?"' Apparently the two had discussed what they considered to be essentially identical dreams, given enhanced import because the dreams regarded their employer, the king. One theme featured three vine shoots while the other had three bread basket images. Picayune details did not concern them as they glossed over the disparate factors which they attributed to heading different governmental agencies. At any rate, neither dreamer made headway in cracking the dream(s).

52. *Pesikta Zutreta Bereshit* 40:4

In Yosef's work capacity he oversaw their daily needs including supplying their toiletries, laundry, and beddings. Eventually he befriended them, earning their friendship and trust. That morning when Yosef entered their detention wing and noticed their dour visages, he thought that there was something wrong with their lodging standards. Inadequate living arrangements perhaps perturbed their royal sensibilities. Had they been common inmates, he would not have taken their gloom seriously. Two VIPs were unhappy. That was Yosef's responsibility.

The whole story came out. 'And they said to him: "We dreamt a dream last night, but there is no one here to interpret it."' Their sour moods had nothing to do with Yosef's dereliction. They, in fact, were pleased with his professionalism. 'And Yosef said to them: "Heaven deciphers man's dreams. Tell them to me."' Yosef added that they were mistaken to think Egyptian soothsayers could work out the dream's meanings. Those charlatans merely grope blindly. Authentic and reliable analysis required skill, to be sure, but without holy inspiration no mystery could be plumbed. In humility, Yosef extended his ear. If Hashem revealed the truth, he would extricate them from their misery.

Since the chief viticulturist's post was the more senior, he began. After hearing all the details, Yosef reviewed and pondered four points:

- 'Behold grape vines were before me.' Grapes alluded to the mishap that landed him in prison.
- 'Vines with three shoots.' That perturbed the minister because he saw three frightening trial outcomes: a) capital punishment, b) exile, or c) relief of post.
- 'Budding, blossoming and ripening grapes.' In the oenophile's case, this spelled an impending and hasty court decree.
- 'I was holding Paroah's goblet.' Did it refer to past service or future?

The beverage mixer was plagued until Yosef explained that he had received conflicting messages. 'And Yosef said to him: "This is the plain meaning…"' Taking each element Yosef told him that the budding grapes foreshadowed a speedy trial, wrapping up in three days. At the hearing, he would be acquitted and reinstated to his former prestigious position. Pouring wine into Paroah's goblet intimated as much. Bearing good news, Yosef concluded. None of the three feared sentences would come to pass: 'In three more days Paroah will

forgive you (not execute) and reinstate (not exile) you in your home and return your assets. You will place Paroah's goblet in his hand as previously when you served him drink (and you will not be dismissed).'

How did Yosef know three referred to days and not months or years? As discussed above, Yosef possessed an excellent mind, but the future trend forecasts came about Divinely.

Dispelling any doubts of the interpretation's veracity, Yosef delivered a clincher. He bet his own release from prison on the forecasts coming to pass. 'Think of me when all goes well with you (and you are returned home). Have compassion on me. Remember me to Paroah (when you are rehired).'

Yosef's interpretation boldly assured his client that his future personal and professional life would flourish. Flush with money and prestige, he would be in a position to significantly help Yosef. Due to his career advancement and security, a second avenue opened itself up. *Protekzia.*

'For I was kidnapped from the Land of the Hebrews and I also did nothing here that warranted placing me in this hole.' The minister heard that Yosef was no security prisoner and certainly no threat to the country. In fact, Canaan and Egypt had long, neighborly relations.[53] Though slave manumission was prohibited, his case was different. Yosef's enslavement had no legal basis in the first place. Potifar was not an issue either as Yosef repeated the entire sordid, superfluous affair with Potifar's wife. Given his nationality and circumstances, a commuted sentencing was no moon shot.

Next came the baker's turn, freshly encouraged to tell all after his colleague's glowing report. 'And the Bread Minister saw that he interpreted benevolently and he said to Yosef: "Also I in my dream."' Despite his initial apprehension, he thought his dream portended good news since both ministers' fate landed them together. No worries.

Yosef listened carefully, but imparted a different, harsh interpretation for the hapless dough man. A single discrepancy between the two dreams proved decisive. In the baker's dream Paroah did not eat his Danish pastries. 'And Yosef told him, "This is your [dream's] meaning."' The minister heard how a triple-layered motif indeed mirrored that of the Drink Minister and his hearing would be completed soon. However, all signs pointed to a guilty

53. Avraham came down there (chapter three, first *aliyah*) and Yitzchak planned to do so (chapter six, first *aliyah*).

verdict. Yosef did not mince words. 'In three days Paroah will decapitate you and hang you on a tree where vultures will peck your flesh.'

'On the third day, marking Paroah's birthday, a *soiree suprême* was made for his staff.' Both ministers were released from detention. The beverage minister was acquitted, and returned to his job serving Paroah for the special occasion. The pastry chef died jerking on the gallows as 'Yosef predicted.'

Paroah lavished gifts on his family, friends, and fans. Yosef could easily have interpreted those two dreams in a variety of ways. However the authoritative answer was the one Heaven planted in his mind and mouth. This was a sampling and precursor to the next *parashah* when the world trembled because of a mighty ruler's dream.

'The mixer minister had been reinstated over [Paroah's] beverages. He placed the goblet in Paroah's palm.' He never did remember Yosef's clemency plea. It was the farthest thing from his mind. 'And he forgot him.' Pinning his hopes on Egyptians had not produced anything but disappointment.

An earlier verse may allude to Yosef suggesting mnemonics for the minister's use ('Remember me in a way that is good for you'). To no avail. Forgetting is an unavoidable part of the human condition. Not only did this quondam client not put in a good word but he could not even put together a cheery care-package to boost Yosef's funk.

'Happy is the man who puts his trust in the Almighty.'[54] Yaakov's special son would have two more years behind bars to contemplate King David's pearls of wisdom.

54. Tehillim 40:5

CHAPTER TEN

PARASHAT MIKETZ

PAROAH'S ACE

First *aliyah*

'After two years passed Paroah dreamed that he was standing at the Nile.'

Trisecting this *parashah* helps readers follow its three separate threads:

- Paroah's dream and its aftermath, including Yosef's interpretation and subsequent meteoric rise to power that culminated with innovative multi-year planning.
- The famine years and Yosef's brothers' first buying trip.
- Binyamin's arrival in Egypt.

§§§

A thorough introductory discussion on dreams, a phenomenon as old as man, is in order. The mention of dreams and dreamers is not uncommon in *Tanach*. Similarly, the Talmud is replete with sources on the subject.

Two thematic headings are:

a) Dream Phenomena
b) The Interpreter or Dream Analyst's Role

While a dream's substance invariably stems, to some extent, from within man's infinite imagination, the phenomenon has three subcategories. The most common form – Type I – comprises total fantasy. Fictitious and vain expressions of man's fears, obsessions and desires are fluff, signifying nothing more than random snapshots of an individual at any given time. Recurring dreams of this sort are a series of replayed pictures, short movie clips or videos. Their source is non-inspirational, lowly, man-driven and thus have clay feet that

do not carry far. Mostly quickly forgotten, they get discarded just as quickly as they came. Only fools dwell upon them.[1]

By contrast, the other two dream types bear potentially significant heavenly messages. These communications are essentially true and valid but differ fundamentally. That is, Type II springs from an attunement to lower celestial forecasting agents (e.g. astrological omens), whereas Type III is experienced via direct Divine Providence. In these categories, man's mind and imagination are receptors. Dreams occur during sleep because that is when man neutralizes resistance, enabling the transmission process. Lulled senses are raided, so to speak, by heavenly impulses channeling their way through man's mind. In a comparable way, when a person quiets his anxieties, enhanced spirituality flows kinetically. These messages are real premonitions, bordering on low-level prophecy. The Sages[2] attested to Type II dreams as one-sixtieth measure of prophecy. They resound quite potently.

Type III dreams are head-on Heavenly harbingers engaging man's imaginative powers. This type of dream is a form of dialogue between Hashem and His most elaborate creation so that Divine Providence is made known or plays out. Heeding them can alleviate pain or even save a life.[3]

Type III dreams' symbols carry pregnant content, specifically customized to the recipient. Whether the communication is negative or positive its import is razor-sharp as it providentially hones in on its target. The dreams of Avimelech[4] and Lavan[5] were probably Type III. In spite of these men's spiritual shortcomings and lack of ample preparation to receive Hashem's word, they experienced it for the sake of the righteous Avraham, Sarah, and Yaakov. Gidon similarly overheard a Midianite recounting a dream and took that it was meant for his ears,[6] and Shaul was deeply perturbed by a lack of Divine communication, including dreams.[7] Daniyel attributed Babylonian King Nevuchadnetzar's dream to a Divine source.[8] The Sages[9] chalking dreams

1. See e.g. *Kohelet* 5:2–6; *Yeshayahu* 29:8; *Yirmiyahu* 29:8; and *Zecharyah* 10:2. See also BT *Gittin* 52a
2. BT *Berachot* 57b
3. See *Iyyov* 33:14–18
4. Chapter four, fourth *aliyah*
5. Chapter seven, sixth *aliyah*
6. *Shoftim* 7:13
7. *Shmuel* I 28:6
8. *Daniyel* 2:28
9. BT *Berachot* 55b

up to Divine intervention, and the concept of a dream amelioration prayer[10] point to the reality of Type III dreams.

To summarize, dream phenomena are classified by three distinct categories ranging from the mundane to sub-prophetic. It is noteworthy that children and simpletons are more likely to receive the latter two dream types on account of their more unfettered imagination. By contrast, intellectuals' constant cogitation shackles their mind's eye's range.

Parenthetically, Aristotle reduced these three dream types broadly into two. He writes that *true* dreams originate in man's mind or reason (read: Divine Providence) whereas *false* ones stem from man's perverse, tainted imagination.

Two guidelines are given for sifting the Type I puff from more potent types. An empty dream will be completely chaotic, with no rhyme or reason, whereas a directed one will have some order. Additionally, a valid vision will invigorate or excite the dreamer, whereas an empty dream evokes no emotion. Note that Avimelech, Lavan, Paroah and Nevuchadnetzar, upon waking knew and could attest to their respective dreams' Divine authorship. Their racing pulse and acute agitation meant that it could have been none other. Heaven, in a manner of speaking, knocked on their doors.

In Paroah's case the knock woke him up, separating a cow-themed first dream from a sheaf-themed second. However, while Types II and III are genuine and meaningful, it is fallacious to assume that they do not contain bizarre, outlandish, or irrelevant traces. They do.

The discussion now shifts from the dream itself to the introductory section's part two: The dream interpreter. In some ways, he resembled a modern-day physician. External physiological phenomena, such as pulse rate, blood and urine samples, and the like, provide data that translate into diagnoses of illness. Similarly, dream factoids provide a window for peeking into psyches' crevices.

Medical training can be broadly bisected as follows: a) Macro issues such as basic life sciences, anatomy, disease types etc. Textbook stuff. b) The patient's particular data: Age, general health, occupation, environment, family background etc. While interns, to be sure, have mastered their field, more success is likely when the attending physician is an experienced, wise practitioner. An accurate diagnosis is a proper treatment's prerequisite. Unavoidably, precise

10. Ibid.

ailment identification entails some guesswork. Multiple disorders present identical symptoms – and errors abound. A bumbling doctor can inadvertently contribute to a patient's health deterioration. Many quacks partner up with the Angel of Death.

Dream analysts work in a parallel fashion. Their arena requires rigorous training in complementary macro cognitive and psychic disciplines. General guidelines and algorithms for deciphering the dream components' symbolism, largely based on a host of free association possibilities, must be obtained. Seemingly, the transmission of this particular discipline had been passed down from the forefathers. For example, when Yosef had his sheaf dream,[11] the brothers grasped the intent instinctively. They listened to his wheat images and parried. 'Will you reign over us?' (In Hebrew the word for "sheaf" is cognate with the word for "strong-armed".[12]) Yaakov lambasted Yosef's sun/moon/stars dream's message. 'Will I, your mother and brothers prostrate before you?' The sun's ubiquitous life-granting effect on nature made the father connection all too obvious to the perceptive patriarch. The moon's reflecting sunlight parallels the female role in marriage and procreation. In tune with tradition, the Sages[13] provide a lengthy list of dream feature denotations.

An accurate diagnosis also rests on a patient's particulars. Like a psychiatrist, the analyst masterfully peeks into a soul's recesses. Often one motif can mean different things to different people. For instance, a man who dreamed himself suspended from a palm tree. If he was a Mafioso, then his message may foretell of an impending personal disaster. Authorities (or vigilantes) might catch and string him high on a palm tree's branches. If the dreamer, however, was a young and accomplished Torah scholar, then the palm tree imaging may signal his prominence over other budding academics.[14] We therefore find the Sages offering propitious interpretations of seeming nightmares,[15] and variant explanations for similar dreams.[16]

More often than not, diagnostic talents are inborn. Some people simply have a knack for it. Call it clairvoyance, intuition, educated guesswork, or all

11. Chapter nine, first *aliyah*
12. אלומה - אלם
13. BT *Berachot* 56b
14. See BT *Yoma* 87b
15. BT *Berachot* 56b
16. BT *Berachot* 57a

of the above. Hence multiple interpretations of a dream can be correct. There are no hard facts. Various analysts zero in on different dream elements, stripping away the excess from the essence. Objectively, they may have all simply touched upon numerous imports.[17] The Talmud is replete with fascinating and riveting passages dealing with a dream's meanings as well as some of their shameless interpreters.[18]

The interpreters' overconfidence in their abilities is totally unwarranted. They would do well to bear four inescapable limitations in mind.

- Dream themes employ phantasmagoria. Providential dreams are flooded with input from the subject's imaginative faculties, garbling reception. Screening out the subjects' static is exceedingly difficult.
- Even after isolating the heaven-sent video clip, analysts must determine where the key symbolism is encoded. At 0:02 in the file or at the end? Sometimes import is scattered throughout disparate images. A single sequence can carry many messages as well. Intuition notwithstanding, getting at dreams' core can be well-nigh impossible.
- A particularly confounding problem is ascertaining whether symbolism was employed at all. Perhaps the dreamer was relayed something more like a vision, and the images straightforwardly conveyed future events.
- The interpreter's range of possibilities is typically circumscribed by a dreamer's particular era, milieu and venue, which is where his mind would probably roam. Potentially cosmic, historic imports are unlikely to be considered.

Clearly then, human resourcefulness goes only so far. The *Tanach* and the Talmud's most successful practioners like Yosef, Daniyel or Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Yehudah *HaNasi* distinguished themselves with Heaven's help. Triumph in this shark-infested pool called the human psyche takes a miracle. Yosef taught as much when he told his wards 'Heaven deciphers man's dreams.'[19] Deflecting credit was not polite humility; it reflected fact. Paroah freely conceded the point – 'Can we find a man so Divinely inspired?'[20]

17. See BT *Berachot* 55b
18. Abravanel here offers the student an explanation for the Talmudic statement that 'All dreams follow their interpretation' (see chapter nine, footnote 11 above) as well as the famous incident of Bar Hedya's conflicting interpretation of Abbaye and Rava's identical dreams. See BT *Berachot* 55b-56a.
19. Chapter nine, seventh *aliyah*
20. Second *aliyah* below

Nevuchadnetzar would later do the same when Daniyel flawlessly interpreted a dream that's import spanned millennia. In Talmudic times, Yerushalayim's spiritual aura facilitated and enhanced successful deciphering.[21]

The divine inspiration necessary for dream unraveling was not prophecy caliber. But while run of the mill interpreters could only grope in the darkness for a dreams' message, Hashem's influence illuminated worthy minds, enabling effortless perception.

In *Parashat Vayeshev*, Yosef's reading of the ministers' dreams was undoubtedly Divinely inspired. Seeing none of the imagination's morass and symbolism's enigma, he realized that the vines, goblets and wine were pristine data, untainted by the Drink Minister's faculties. Putting a cup in Paroah's hand meant exactly that. Such straightforward messages are exceedingly rare. They are virtually the last place hackneyed dream decoders would look.

Had Yosef been any old dream reader, it would have been tempting to interpret the baker's bird-nibbling vision as representing Paroah eating his dough products. Same night, same jail, same dream. But, once again, trenchant Yosef realized that there was nothing beyond the *pshat*. In three days, birds would have the baker for supper.

Yosef, we will soon read, was called upon to succeed where Paroah's scientists failed. The monarch wanted a satisfactory explanation for his dreams. Where had the hoary hieroglyph heads gone wrong? They were tethered to textbook tactics. Three assumptions led them astray:

- Two dreams separated by waking, with two image sets, meant two different messages.
- The dreams related to Paroah personally, and portended current occurrences. There was nothing cosmic about them.
- The bovines and stalks were emblematic of daughters and provinces. Straightforward interpretation was out of the question.

Yosef knew far better:

- One dream was interrupted due to its recipient's agitation.
- It had international implications over fourteen years.
- Fat cows and stalks, meant, well, fat cows and stalks. Scrawny stuff spelled scarcity.

§§§

21. BT *Berachot* 55b

Explosions – fateful and fitful nightmares – fulminated Paroah's bedchamber. 'Paroah stood at the Nile.' The vision's venue figured prominently since the river's water level motored Egypt's economy. 'And behold seven healthy-looking and fattened cows came up from the Nile.' Sight lodges first impressions and these plump ones had eye-appeal. 'They grazed on reeds.'

Another image superimposed upon the first one. 'And behold seven other cows followed them out of the Nile. Ugly ones...skimpy ones.' The distinct reason for their haggard appearance had to do with the receding river water flow, a perilous Egyptian vicissitude. The bovine juxtaposition suggested swift, sequential events. 'The haggard and skimpy cows devoured the healthy, plump cows. Paroah awoke.' The lurid depiction upset the king, arousing him from sleep momentarily.

'And he fell asleep and dreamed again.' The fresh images gave Paroah the sense that this dream was a second, different one. 'And behold stout and robust stalks grew on one shoot.' Interposed came another pictured frame. 'And behold seven skimpy, wind blasted stalks sprouted alongside and ingested them.' Paroah's sleep pattern was shot. 'And Paroah awoke. It was [only] a dream.' The king's vision was very vivid, lifelike. Was it a dream?

'That was in the morning. And he was dumbfounded.' Three elements thus validated the vision's veracity:

- Structure: Seamless scenes and scenery.
- Timing: Morning dreams suggest a relaxed state, allowing for less static interference.
- Reaction: Strong emotive symptoms convey authenticity.

To Paroah's thinking, this event represented a major national crisis. 'And he convened all of his naturalists and wise men. And Paroah told them his *dream*. No one could interpret *them* for Paroah.' Although it seems that nobody present ventured a guess, the Sages[22] understand that the council strutted their dream stuff, signifying nothing save for infuriating and discouraging the head of state to the brink of an emotional meltdown. Why was he dissatisfied with their interpretations? We will take that up in the following *aliyah*. On a very basic level, Paroah consistently referred to his *one* dream whereas the oracles assumed they were separate.

22. *Bereshit Rabbah* 89:6

'And the Beverage Minister spoke to Paroah saying: "My sins do I drudge up today."' Believing he could assist, he first had to confront two misdeeds. Sheepishly, he began by reminding Paroah of an event that had landed him in prison. As he relived the tense time leading up to his trial, he also felt remiss about ignoring the man who had supplied him clutch support – Yosef.

Contritely, he rehashed the regrettable affair before continuing. Seeking to put Yosef in the best possible light, he deflected potential potentate hand waving.

'Paroah bristled at his servants.' There was no way that the Jewish boy knew that I was innocent and the baker man was guilty, leading him to interpret the dreams as he had. 'He placed me in the Chief Executioner's detention together with the Baker Minister.' Yosef was not influenced by prison placement. If I had been in the VIP suite and the baker in the dungeon, one could imagine the Semite angling for favors. But that was not the case. 'We dreamt on the same night, we two.' That Hebrew was not reading astrological omens in determining the meaning. The stars were aligned the same for both dreams – practically identical.

Another hurdle was Paroah suggesting that Yosef had found out about the ministers' lives, habits, milieu etc. and ventured an educated guess based on that. 'There with us was a Hebrew youth, a slave to the Chief Executioner.' He never left prison; he knew nothing of Egyptian internal affairs; a greenhorn; far too low on the social ladder to meaningfully research aristocrats. Despite his consummate outsider status and without any way to sleuth or gather intelligence, Yosef managed with flawless precision.

'We told him our dreams.' Not because we thought he could solve them, but there was nobody else to talk to. 'And he solved them according to our [respective] dreams.' He never looked beyond the simple meaning of the dream. No symbolisms – a highly unusual methodology. *Might be worth your time, your Highness. The truth is, we originally laughed the whole thing off, until* 'what he said would happen, happened. He said I would be reinstated and that the baker would hang.'

Note that the oenophile omitted the three branches symbolizing three days. Paroah would attribute that to Yosef's pre-knowledge of the Egyptian's birthday bash.

The king was impressed. 'And Paroah sent and called for Yosef. They whisked him from the pit. And he shaved, changed his clothing and came before Paroah.'

Second *aliyah*

'And Paroah said to Yosef: "I dreamed and have no one to interpret. I have heard that you can hear a dream and explain it."'

Primly groomed and attired, Yosef was removed from prison and brought before the emperor. Paroah could not know how fortuitous this meeting would be. As Yosef entered the palace, observed the opulence of his host's surroundings, he may have begun to sense how Heaven's mills grind slowly and exceedingly fine. Moshe wrote about life's dichotomies and Divine accountabilities this way. 'I [Hashem] kill and I make alive.'[23]

Consider how the Almighty began to rectify all prior wrongs perpetrated against Yosef. Track ten measure-for-measure offsets:

Yosef was hated by his brothers	Yosef was promoted above Egypt's best and brightest
The brothers despised Yosef on account of his dreams	Paroah's dream brought Yosef endearment and respect
The brothers stripped Yosef of his special outer coat	Paroah dressed Yosef in fine, royal satin garments
Yosef's brothers threw him into a pit naked	Paroah brought him out of his prison pit and dressed him
Yosef had been sold as chattel	Yosef emerged from prison to rise to Egypt's top commercial position
Yosef's brothers feigned ignorance of his identity	Yosef returned the ploy
Yosef was estranged from his brothers	Yosef was reunited with them
Yosef's ignoble descent to Egypt	Yosef was promoted to the position of Federal Bank's Governor/Planner
Yosef refused Potifar's wife	Yosef married eminent Potifera's daughter
The Drink Minister reneged on Yosef's relief efforts	Yosef is rescued through the Minister's praise

Bitter past knocks served as stepping stones to a glorious future. Hashem had Yosef's back even as it was bending under devastating blows. 'And Paroah said to Yosef: "I had a dream and no one can interpret it."' Paroah was ambiguous

23. *Devarim* 32:39

about whether this was in absolute or relative terms. That is, either the wise men's suggestions failed to meet his approval, or Paroah was on the brink of despair in the decoding department. Regardless, the monarch needed help and did not mince words. 'I heard that you can hear a dream and explain it.' On the Drink Minister's recommendations, Paroah called out. He especially sought relief from the bumbling talkers in tongues who surrounded him. Yosef, he was told, spoke straight. His ability to explain dreams, bereft of metaphor, was nothing short of awesome.

Yosef cleared the record. 'And Yosef answered Paroah saying: "Without me Hashem addresses Paroah's status."' Humbly, he prefaced to Paroah (as he did earlier with the ministers) that his role functioned merely as a conduit. Taking responsibility would be tantamount to a knife owning up to a kill. Is it not the driving force behind a murder weapon which commits murder?

Paroah continued and relayed his dreams though minor changes were appended for clarity, emphasis or poetic license. The Nile served as the dream's venue and the king proceeded to describe what appeared as two separate and ghoulishly concluding nightmares. The first one depicted a Kafkaesque cow theme, with seven vibrant, grazing robust cows being devoured by seven emaciated and bulimic bovine. The second dream, no less harrowing than the first, featured seven stocky, plump grain stalks ingested by seven anorexic and parched stalks. In both cases, even after consuming filling and fattening meals, no sign of satiety or weight gain accrued to the eaters. They remained malnourished.

The verses do not record very much of Paroah and Yosef's dialogue. Likely it followed a typical question and answer format. First, Yosef ripped apart the advisors' hypotheses. 'And Yosef said to Paroah: "Paroah's dream is one. That which Hashem will do He tells Paroah."' This was one dream, and there was no encryption. Hashem had made the import abundantly clear. True the dream had different themes and had been interrupted by a brief wakeful interlude but that did not alter the *pshat*. Yosef reasoned that cows represented plowing fields and agricultural work, the stalks – harvest seasons. The matter's essence concerned produce yields – abundant and impoverished ones.

Yosef then moved to the third area where the Egyptian wise men had flunked: Did the dream have a meaning specific to Paroah or was it bigger? Were its effects immediate and brief or long in coming and extended? Yosef again begged indulgence and inserted a non-personal slant.

Expanse is what Hashem conveyed to the king. Mega-events of bounty and peril would not last in terms of seasons but in years – fourteen years! Paroah's dream foretold an entire region reeling from super-hyper and hypo-activity on a scale heretofore unknown. 'Behold seven years are coming – there will be cornucopia throughout Egypt's lands. Seven years of famine follow.' Yosef depicted the effects of the ravage and scorched earth. 'All of Egypt's bounty years will be forgotten. Famine will despoil the land.' *The mother of all great dry-spells.*

If Paroah harbored any doubts, Yosef looked the king squarely in the eyes and reiterated: 'That which Hashem will do, He tells Paroah.' This was no Type I ordinary dream. No way. If Paroah had not attended lectures on the subject earlier, he had now. One can imagine Paroah sitting at the edge of his big divan listening to Yosef's brilliant discourse. He wondered why Hashem imparted this coveted if crammed information to him. Later in *Tanach*, Bavel King Nevuchadnetzar would have the same question.[24]

To be sure, Egypt and Bavel were two very different superpowers and thus required two very different approaches. In *sefer Daniyel,* Nevuchadnetzar was plagued with a very specific dilemma and invested time and energy meditating in the hopes of arriving at a solution. Paroah had neither a particular problem nor a pressing need for cogitation. At least that is what Paroah thought. Yosef apprised him, in so many words, that whiplash whirlwinds waited imminently. He spelled out to the king that, indeed, his dream had earth-shattering ramifications.

Paroah grasped the dream's gravitas. Hashem had sounded a mighty global clarion call. Yosef conveyed that Paroah's prominence and influence actually made him a logical choice. As the regional leader, he could spearhead initiatives that might ameliorate devastation. Proper positioning could save untold myriads of lives.

Paroah wanted to move from the theoretical to the practical. If predictable, could nature's thrashing be contained? Besides a silver-lining of good news, Yosef had sensible solutions. 'Behold seven years are coming – there will be cornucopia throughout Egypt's lands.' That meant that only Paroah's territory would prosper. The king should not erringly think that the river-front fields alone would flourish. A boon is coming to all of Egypt. But not to the neighboring lands. After the local gold rush ceases all hell will break out. 'Seven years of famine follow.' Read: in all Middle Eastern lands. 'All of Egypt's bounty years will be forgotten. Famine will despoil the land.' Plentiful

24. See *Daniyel* 2:29 and Abravanel ad. loc.

resources could be hoarded throughout the bounty years, but the very earth and soil of Egypt would be parched, desiccated, and devastated.

'And the land's prosperity will be as if it never happened because of that famine's aftermath.' Having previously sketched the problem's parameters, this verse comes for emphasis. Even after the famine and resumption of normal rainfall, the damage will have been so extensive that average precipitation would not restore pre-drought's fertility.

Anticipating Paroah's question about the interrupted double-action dream sequence, came a preemptive rejoinder: 'And regarding the [seeming] dream repetition twice to Paroah, it is because the Almighty is all set to carry it out. Hashem hastens to execute it.'

Having patiently answered all of Paroah's questions and stressing urgency it made perfect sense for Yosef to present a workable plan. If Paroah could find and set up the appropriate candidate immediately then Heaven's advance warning would allow for remedial, if gargantuan, measures. 'And now let Paroah locate a shrewd and erudite man, placing him in charge of Egypt.'

There are, of course, smart people everywhere. Paroah's challenge was as much defining as finding Mr. Right. Essentially it mushroomed into quite a list because shrewdness and erudition can cover many specialized fields of expertise. In this context, and since saving the planet was no trivial task, only a powerhouse need apply.

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Many new fiscal laws would have to be put into effect, guaranteeing social protests if not riots. Levelheaded negotiation skills, astuteness, charm and wisdom would go a long way in nipping any unrest in the bud. Timing grain market purchases during the boom years to avoid price hikes would be essential. The creation of supply/demand pressures during the famine to benefit the palace, while not offending general welfare sensibilities, would be a tightrope act. The knowledge of food storage and preservation techniques would be vital to success. One last thing. 'Placing him in charge of Egypt' meant authority. The man needed Paroah's full trust, cooperation, and discretion to implement change.

While Paroah was busy catching his breath, Yosef rattled on furiously:

- 'Once Paroah does that, the official must appoint overseers' for the seven years of plenty.
- 'Place a 20% levy on Egypt.' One fifth of all produce would be government property.
- 'Collect all the food of those good years.' The royal exchequer would take advantage of bargain basement prices and buy all the grain on the free market.
- 'Accumulate the produce under Paroah's authority, some left in cities and some under centralized supervision.' Leaving the produce scattered throughout Egypt would cut down on loading and transportation costs as well as calm locals who would rail against the emptying of whole provinces. The balances would all be stored in the capital city.
- 'Food must be held in trust for the land until the seven year hunger in Egypt. That way the earth will not perish.' The appointed overseers must be sternly warned against embezzling during the famine.

The machine-gun rattle sounding from Yosef's mouth may have carried a somewhat more fawning tone. Yosef unfurled two options for the sovereign:

a) 'Let Paroah do it.' Since the task requires such enormous skills, the best man for the job is Your Highness. 'But you will have to appoint officials over the land. Personally collect a 20% tax' – Egypt's IRS could not be trusted to keep their grubby hands off unaccounted produce – 'and let them purchase grain and hoard it under Paroah's control.' – government-provided funds were much easier to track. Paper trails would have to be provided.

b) Yosef intimated that the overseers' bloated payroll would only be necessary if Paroah, obviously the best man for the job, would manage the operation. However, if HRH found the right shrewd and erudite man (*ahem*) that could be avoided…

One imagines Yosef summing up an entire Heaven-sent lecture series, dream analysis, global assessment and multi-year business plan before addressing Paroah, his prospective client. If he would have been seated in an executive chair, might he not have mentally offered a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving, leaned the plush seat back, relaxed, swiveled, clasped his hands and concluded: "Get the right point man and you, His Royal Highness, are set."

Yosef envisioned a flush trade balance with a diversified basket loaded with local and regional currencies. Grandiose plans unfolded in Yosef's prophetic mind's eye; the sky was the limit. Paroah's wealth would wax legendary and his name would become a household word. Yosef could barely control his racing thoughts. Nigh-prophetic Divinely inspired counsel, like spewed molten lava, rushed unstoppably.[25] Further spurring Yosef were:

- Concern for populace welfare
- Validating that Hashem had downloaded the dreams to inform Paroah of upcoming events
- Verification of his interpretation's veracity

'And the matter was pleasing to Paroah and all his servants.' How did the king know with certainty that Yosef was correct but his gurus' take was bunkum? The dream schemata followed the accepted principles. Type II and III dreams are sent in pure forms. Perhaps due to sublimated fears or feelings, encryption with symbolism and allusion is accomplished by the dreamer's imaginative faculties. Thus the subject unwittingly blurs a vision's message. Paraoh had been brooding, mulling, ruminating, searching, racking his brain. It was torment, agony. *What was that dream?…WHAT WAS THAT DREAM? …AAAAAAARGH!!!* Paroah's pinhead pundits just made things worse. Yosef's interpretation jived with the original dream data as if he had logged on to Paroah's neurons' hard drive. Buried deep in his subconscious, Paroah had once heard what Yosef now declared. The Hebrew slave's decoding brought a rush of recognition. When his analysis was completed, the king's heart and gut sighed with relief.

25. Cf. *Yirmiyahu* 20:9

Someone finally understood him and talked his language. 'And Paroah said to his servants: "Can we find a man so Divinely inspired?"'

The king understood exactly what he had found in Yosef, though he foresaw a snag. Court intrigue may prove Paroah's undoing. How best to deal with factious interest groups and inflated advisor egos? It was a long-shot that the jockeying ministers would pusillanimously stand by and allow a dark horse candidate to become Paroah's Number Two.

Here is where Paroah had a genius stroke. 'Can *we* find a man so Divinely inspired?' He convened his ministers and chief advisors to vet Yosef. The Sages[26] exhorted as much: Before appointing a man to lead communal affairs, the public must be consulted and in agreement. But Paroah had more in mind. Unwittingly, the top brass' involvement and voting would clinch it. Effectively Paroah out-maneuvered his advisors. They were not asked to vote on whether or not Yosef was shrewd and erudite. Many locals were savvy. They were not voting if Yosef was fit for the job. How galling! Unthinkable! Semites of the Hebrew persuasion were loathed. Paroah's courtiers were therefore smug in the knowledge that their monarch would opt for the personal implementation of Yosef's plan, as Yosef had originally suggested. Concomitant with that track was plush sinecure city. Overseers would be appointed. Images of unbridled power and piles of $$$$ danced before their eyes. What did they vote on? They agreed that Yosef's analysis and concept held validity. In other words, they agreed to Yosef's plan, practically assured of their own promotions.

Third *aliyah*

'And Paroah said to Yosef: "Since Hashem has revealed all of this to you, no one is as shrewd and erudite as you."'

Showing his hand, poker playing Paroah put down his ace for the unsuspecting ministers to see. Their job advancement fantasies had been royally flushed down the drain. In disbelief, they heard their leader nominate the new point man. Yosef's echoed name on each of their incredulous lips adjourned the meeting.

The king juggled their vying interests in order to bypass the veteran power brokers, catapult Yosef and quell the disgruntled rebels. Pragmatics dictated that Paroah must have been certain and confident that his hunch was right. What brought him to that conclusion?

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26. BT *Berachot* 55a

Paroah used deductive logic. He believed and managed to elicit a consensus on Yosef's prophetic ability. Two working hypotheses fell into place. One: Prophecy rests on the most learned of men. Yosef perforce was Egypt's top scholar. Two: Intellect alone does not guarantee prophecy; it needs perfection in understanding and the integration of the human condition in all its facets. Yosef must be Egypt's most perspicacious person. Since Hashem revealed His mysteries to him it followed axiomatically that he must be Egypt's Best and Brightest.

'You will be my palace's overlord and my people will heed your orders. Only nominally will I be higher than you.' Directing his personal palace affairs was a logical stepping stone from which to advance. Plato characterized three progressive areas in man's exertion of leadership skills:

- Astute self-discipline in personal conduct
- Estate management
- Nation governance entails the widest sphere of influence and responsibility

After Paroah observed his candidate's lofty personal potential (prophecy) he granted him absolute palace and government authority. The verse differentiates between the two spheres. Palatial work could be attended to by Yosef directly: 'palace's overlord' whereas government required careful delegation: 'people will heed your orders.' The top title, the Torah emphasized, had been retained by Paroah.

'And Paroah told Yosef: "See that I have placed you in charge of Egypt."' As Yosef had urged, the king wasted no time in preparing for the looming turmoil. Selecting the second choice offered by Yosef, Paroah gave him the entire enterprise. Though Yosef had encouraged Paroah to shoulder the Herculean tasks, he deferred to his adjutant who was handed the reins. As helmsman, he needed not only authority but the accoutrements of authority as well. Liberally, the king attended to both requisites. 'And Paroah removed the signet from his hand, placing it on Yosef's. He had him dressed in linen garments and placed the golden chain around his neck. He had him ride in his second royal chariot.'

Coronation ceremonials followed. 'Heralds called before him: "Kneel before he who is placed over the entire land of Egypt!"' Hail and prostrate

to the king's very incarnate! Tip-top, Yosef stepped out to his new challenge looking dapper. Not too shabby for a detestable Hebrew National.

In addition to power and its concomitant perception, Paroah handed Yosef one last thing. Security. Not in terms of a contract or salary but as in security agents and palace guards. Yosef insisted on protective measures to forestall jealousy and injury. His honed survival instincts, apparently, were a lesson for which he could thank his brothers. Protection came in the form of a durable, broadly empowering constitutional clause. 'And Paroah said to Yosef: "I am Paroah. In the whole land no man lifts his finger or toe without your consent."' Paroah prefaced, as it were, his absolute rule. By the powers vested in him, he duly chartered the same upon his viceroy. Yosef could tightly restrict anyone's action or movement. No one could or would stand in his way.

Yosef's Jewish lineage, Paroah determined, was a thorny issue. The viceroy needed an Egyptian moniker. 'And Paroah called Yosef's name "Zaphnat Paneach" (Knower of all Riddles).' Another thing. Classic monarch and inveterate politician that Paroah was, he cemented the deal by marrying Yosef to one of Egypt's most prominent personae's daughter. 'And he gave him Osnat daughter of Potiphera the Priest of Ohn in marriage.' Paroah counted on Osnat's family connections to consolidate inroads. Yosef was now part of the royal family – in every imaginable way. Laden with credentials and connections, 'Yosef went all over the Land of Egypt,' consolidating support.

'And at age thirty, Yosef stood before Paroah, King of Egypt.' Yosef's jet black, full head of hair blatantly betrayed his only blemish – youth. Cynics, at least initially, questioned how a young man would manage running an empire. An answer was not long in coming. Miraculously, Paroah was so impressed by Yosef that it mattered not at all. His charisma crowned all his other traits, making his leadership irresistible.

'Yosef left Paroah's presence and combed the entire land of Egypt.' In those days, greybeards ruled and muftis were a bastion of crotchety gerontocrats. He was their *bête-noir*. In Paroah's palace, surveillance kept envy in check. In outlying places, guardian *malachim* watched him vigilantly, provided safe passage and returned him unharmed.

'And during the seven-year bounty the earth produced in fistfuls.' Testing Yosef's theories proved simple. An unprecedented economic growth motored supernatural successes. Skepticism receded and dissipated.

On top of a 20% levy, '[Yosef] collected all of Egypt's septennial plenty's food, storing the food in the cities.' The viceroy purchased all the grain on the market for dirt cheap. Wisely, he transported the produce from the fields to the cities in order to prevent pilfering. 'Food from fields proximate to a city was placed within that city.' Grain from agricultural expanses that were distant from urban centers was shipped to the capital. As we will soon see, foreigners were restricted to purchase from that central location, and the viceroy personally oversaw that operation.

'And Yosef gathered corn as if they were grains of beach sands.' Royal surfeit and plenty mounded higher after fat profits had been skimmed off by the central government, compounded by the regime's market cornering. 'Counting stopped because there was no longer any reckoning.' With the deliveries arriving fast and furious, the accountants lost track of the bushel tallies. Yosef was blindly trusted.

'Yosef had two sons before the famine.' Did the V.P.'s fantabulous success go to his head? 'Yosef called his firstborn Menasheh.' Amidst magnificent power and prestige, let alone an airtight schedule and the supervision of a massive enterprise, Yosef never lost sight of his father, family and homeland. He explained his son's name: 'Hashem has made me forget my servitude, but my father's home has forgotten me.' 'And the second son he called Efraim for Hashem caused my descendants to multiply in the land of my affliction.'

For pious Yosef, all the regal splendor and honor heaped upon him never removed the sharp pain of Egypt's spiritual poverty. A palace without his father and family offered Yosef nothing. *Eretz* Israel was always on his mind. During every wakeful moment his thoughts wistfully meandered to the halcyon days when he had learned timeless Torah values at his father's side. No royal robe could ever warm his displaced, refugee soul.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And Egypt's seven years of plenty finished.'

No sooner had seven go-go years elapsed than Egypt plunged into morass. 'And the seven famine years began as Yosef said. And there was famine in all of the lands. However throughout Egypt there was bread.' This was the bipolar decade with no breathing space or interspersed median agricultural seasons. Riches-to-rags ruin struck. Egypt's mainstay, the Nile, hardly babbled. Field

workers lacked gainful employment. Blight sessions did not come in bouts but in successive years. Predicable and dependable, Egypt's deterioration seemed like it would never cease. Only human suffering was aplenty.

Yosef's dire predictions vindicated Paroah's choice and trust. Indeed, the entire Middle East was a sorry spot growing nothing more than dust and tumbleweed. Fortunately, Egypt had reserves on which to subsist. In contrast to peoples beyond the border, these locals did have bread. Not for long. An incongruous situation quickly assumed alarming and lopsided proportions. Starving foreigners bought local grain with legal tender. Egyptians myopically gave in to cupidity's call, windfall profits clinking in their cash registers. Hoping against hope for next year's Nile renaissance, they swapped their sheaves for shekels. It resembled, in a manner of speaking, speculative futures gambling.

The bad news was that the stored town and city grain supplies began to diminish. Silver does not put food on the table so Egyptians began wondering how their fat bank accounts would benefit them when the staples disappeared.

'And the famine hit all of the Egyptian lands. The people cried out to Paroah for bread.' If the Egyptians had bread why did they cry out? Snapping out of their shortsighted stupor, they called for government intervention and protectionism against rich, raiding foreign buyers. Left unchecked, these merchants would cause hyperinflation and/or starvation.

Hardly inclined to help Main Street, Paroah was non-committal and positively evasive. 'And Paroah said to the Egyptians: "Go to Yosef. Do whatever he tells you."' The Torah does not record Yosef's response but his laissez-faire actions spoke loudly. Not coincidentally, Yosef's underlying goal intersected with Paroah's. How would the accelerated depletion help both of them? Paroah stood to gain because the government storehouses fastidiously and feverishly prepared for the eventuality that the local supply would cease. Greater demand meant greater price increase pressures. What could be better for Paroah & Co. than locals competing with foreigners to buy government product? Economics 101. In contrast, Yosef looked forward to more buyers from abroad, hoping to meet up with his brothers.

'And the famine was throughout the land. Yosef opened all the [royal granaries] and sold to Egypt.' Yosef had a ready response for denizens who would complain about price gouging. Had they not marked up their prices

exorbitantly when selling to foreigners? Current market conditions did not warrant any decrease.

After the locals sold their reserves, the government storehouses opened for business. Clamoring customers queued up. 'The whole world then came to Egypt to buy produce from Yosef because the famine was relentless everywhere.' Paroah's grain was gold and not incidentally, the only bullion bushels in town. For the king, these years were mighty lucrative. Paroah looked on approvingly as his chief architect, Yosef, oversaw astronomical revenue and profit.

Phase I of Avraham's severed-animal covenant awoke from hibernation, if you will, when Yosef met Paroah and began his palace employment. Phase II lumbered and stretched in Canaan with Yaakov's observation. 'And Yaakov saw that Egypt is selling.' Egyptian warehouse sales to aliens made headline news, so naturally everyone talked about it. The patriarch saw the arriving grain merchants from Egypt and watched his family buy food from fleecing middlemen with spiking service and transportation costs. Yaakov chastised his prodigal sons. 'Why do you put on airs about dignity?' He saw spendthrifts who appeared impervious to high-end retail prices. Others paid less because they troubled themselves.

'Head down there,' he chided. Take responsibility for supporting your families. Yaakov told them that when it comes to putting bread on the table, a man has got to do whatever it takes. Foolish pride – they could ill-afford.

Against their will, ten of Yosef's brothers left for Egypt to buy grain. Significantly the men are referred to as 'Yosef's brothers' (versus Yaakov's sons). This signals the materialization of Yosef's dreams as it said 'your sheaves gyrated and bowed.'[27] Homage to the king sheaf was about to commence. Of course only the reader is aware of Yaakov's directive's import and Divine Providence. The brothers thought in terms of filial piety. Yaakov was interested in instilling healthy attitudes about *parnassah*.

Binyamin should have joined his brothers in Egypt – 'eleven stars bowed down to me'[28] – except his father detained him. 'And Yaakov did not send Yosef's brother Binyamin with his brothers saying, "Lest disaster befall him."' Yaakov associated Rachel and her sons with ill-fortune. Perhaps paradoxically

27. Chapter nine, first *aliyah*
28. Ibid.

for the reader, there is no indication that Yaakov had lost his trust in his sons vis-à-vis Binyamin. He truly believed that if a life-threatening situation presented itself, the brothers would act valorously. Rather his concern centered on unpredictable, sudden events. Unforeseen, they cannot be forestalled even by the best-intentioned brethren.

The last mention of Yosef's brothers was in *Parashat Vayeshev*, dealing with the Yehudah and Tamar's episode.[29] How did things develop with the others? Likely they, as Yehudah, drifted apart on account of the tense recriminations and set up autonomous homesteads. Since they were no longer dependent on their father's support, all the respective household heads traveled to Egypt. Entering the grain fairgrounds, the brothers inconspicuously hid among their fellow foreign merchants.

The Torah attests to Yosef's honest work ethic. 'And Yosef, ruler of the land, sold to the people.' His was a hands-on approach and he refused to delegate. Three reasons explain why Yosef insisted on working the till:

- Grain was a precious commodity. He would have felt derelict had he chosen another to do this important job.
- Yosef's high-profile, visibility, and accountability paralleled his brothers'. When it comes to life's necessities no man should display false pride and petty reservations.
- Topping the list, Yosef kept a discerning eye open for his brothers. It would significantly complicate matters to leave their descriptions for others.

After the brothers chose their grain, they made their way over to Yosef working the exchange's front desk. Clearly, the exchequer was an important personage. 'Yosef's brothers approached him and bowed in deference. Yosef spotted and recognized them. Disguised, he spoke harshly with them.'

Generally, people identify friends in either of two ways: looks or voice. Despite twenty-two-years, Yosef had no doubts that his brothers had arrived. He may have discreetly hid his face so that they would not recognize him. His gruff tone and content would surely put them on the defensive. Perhaps

29. Chapter nine, fourth *aliyah*

tough words were all that was necessary to fluster their concentration and stymie their identification of him.

'WHERE DO YOU COME FROM?' Since the question implied two parts – what their origin is and why they came to Egypt – they answered both. 'They said: "We are from Canaan and have come to purchase grain."' Yosef's mind rewound the years. Familiar fraternal faces, fraternal voices. His eyes had not played tricks on him. Their eyes and ears failed to recognize anything. 'And Yosef recognized his brothers but they did not know him.'

Yosef's behavior had two rationales. Wise and righteous Yosef surmised and grasped the Divine scheme that called for his father's and siblings' preservation. That meant his role was to support them in Egypt. In the grand scheme of things, Yosef's sale made perfect sense. Therefore the brothers were not deserving of the capital punishment associated with abduction and slave-trafficking.[30] More accurately, Yosef discerned between punishments for malicious action: *results* versus *intent*. The former did not assign culpability whereas the latter resonated with wrongdoing. The punishment reflected the crime so he would not harm them but would threaten it.

Practically hand-delivered to Yosef, the brothers received exacting retribution for their maltreatment roles.

Suspecting Yosef of spying on them in order to slander them to Yaakov	Accusing them of espionage
Imprisoning Yosef in the Dotan pit	Imprisoning Shimon
Selling Yosef as a slave	Taking Binyamin as a slave

While Yosef's first rationale emphasized Divine tinkering, a second motivation took into account trauma's very real human face. Absolute ambivalence gripped him. The following discussion plumbs Yosef's psyche as he worked through two decades of dislocation and desolation. What should

30. *Shmot* 21:16

he do with his brothers who now lay prostrate before him? Three options lay before him:

- **Cold Revenge.** Pretend that he did not know them as they had once feigned. Cruel, sardonic vengeance in return for theirs. A tit for a tat. The Sicilian choice presented problems such as other Canaanite merchants who might recognize him and expose his ruthlessness. Not to mention the risk of recognition by the brothers themselves, with everyone finding out about his ignoble trek to Egypt. This tack would further delay Yaakov's delivery of badly needed food as well as prolong his agony over his lost son. Besides, it is not the path of heaven-fearing personae. ~~*Revenge*~~
- *Happy Endings.* Put an end to the shenanigans and make up outright. Support the family while they dwell in Canaan. The downside called into consideration the age-old canard about dual loyalty. Yosef's detractors would holler that Paroah's treasures are headed north of the border. Was Yosef Canaan's Trojan horse? ~~*Immediate reconciliation*~~
- **Close Ranks.** Bring Yaakov's family to Egypt and settle them on the land. This option had merit but also shortcomings. What if the brothers grew to resent his generosity and support as demeaning and domineering? He shuddered to consider another outbreak of sibling rivalry and jealousy. If only there was a way to determine what the brothers had learned during the twenty-two year hiatus! Had there been regret, change, *teshuvah*? Flashpoint.

A test was found. Yosef pinned his father's entire household's survival on a single issue: What kind of people were these who now straightened up from their hunched, subservient bow? 'And Yosef recalled his dreams that he had dreamed for their sake.' Bowing human sheaves swirled a dervish and waved just as featured in the first vision. Would there be a second reenactment with Binyamin and his father? Were they even still alive? The espionage charge promised to flush out information. Yosef had been plagued by that very doubt: Could the second dream also be fulfilled on Egyptian soil?

Yosef demanded to know if the family stood and was determined to cauterize the hemorrhaging from the kidnapping and blanch the stain. Could Yaakov's family climb back from the precipice? Crisis triggers and galvanizes

individuals or family with opportunity and catharsis. Did Yaakov's sons have the right stuff? Would a blossoming Divine experiment planted by Yaakov's father and grandfather choke, wither? Did the patriarch's descendants devolve into no more than conniving mobsters and separatists?

So many years ago, Yosef dreamt. In Chevron, he had confided to them what he believed to be a prophecy in the hopes of evoking fraternal support. It was his way of toning down ill-begotten feelings and envy. Everything became gnarled and twisted. Instead of bracing them for his inevitable dominance, it consumed them. Closed-minded and misguided, they loathed his gall and galloping dreams. A feeble attempt to derail destiny brought them to their lowest swing. Yosef was sold. Gone and forgotten. Their former small-minded ways needed a fix, and a punishment too.

Seething from the depths of replayed and relived despair escaped a primordial bellow. 'YOU ARE ALL… PROFESSIONAL SPIES! GATHERING INTELLIGENCE HAS BROUGHT YOU TO THE LAND.' Egypt's crowned prince charged these highly trained and expert agents with aggravated counts of espionage, treason and conspiracy. A headline may have read:

Accomplished Agents Apprehended

The staggering accusations paled the brothers. Addressing the more pressing allegation of their current engagement in espionage, they replied 'No sir! We have come to buy food!' Even a desultory examination of the brothers' belongings made the charges appear ludicrous. They hoped that their donkeys and backpacks would lend viable testimony. Were a few gunny sacks and empty burlap bags the mark of snoops? The contention that they were part of the Canaanite Intelligence Agency was refuted: 'We are all one man's sons. We are honest, not spies.' Each family member could vouch for the other's integrity. More family history revealed to the accuser that spying had no place among its members.

Perhaps this last statement was one sweeping denial of all charges. Given their sibling relationship, how irrational would it be for a father to endanger all of his children's lives? Parents go to great lengths to keep harm away. As far as being moles, their noble bearing belied that notion. Classic suspects in that area would be opportunistic city tramps and waifs who draw absolutely no attention to themselves.

The man scuttled their defense, dismissing their specious arguments. 'No! You have come to find the land's underbelly!' It was immaterial if they practiced the trade for years or were trainees. His gut told him that they came to raid Egypt's bulging vaults. The man called them out on being a big, happy family. Which man has ten sons? Displaying wrath the man acted as if he did not believe a word they said. Spies masquerading as simple grain buyers – a most clever cover and smokescreen.

A peculiar line of reasoning followed when they had a bigger surprise in store. Ten siblings was not the whole story. 'And they said: "Your servants are twelve brothers. We are the sons of a Canaanite. The little one is with our father. One is gone."' Not ten but 'your servants are twelve brothers.' Somehow the revelation that they had one father and four mothers was supposed to convince the man to drop the charges. It didn't. It did however fill in a few more blanks for Yosef. Now he knew that his father and brother were alive.

Basic human nature explains why the brothers divulged so much. As the accused are wont to do, they provided small details to substantiate their claims. They told Yosef intimate family particulars. Their kid brother did not come along and join them because he was overly protected and inexperienced in worldly ways. Another brother brought the total number to twelve but he disappeared long ago. Jawing got them nowhere. 'And Yosef said to them: "This proves what I have been saying all along. You are all spies."' No family would send so many of their sons to buy grain when two or three representatives sufficed. Even the nonsense about the one missing, the man found telling. He is probably gumshoeing somewhere else, he scowled.

The man in charge had no more time for the brothers' grainy family portraits. He kept it simple. 'This is your test – so help Paroah – if you want to leave here: Bring your little brother here.' The prosecutor's logic was compelling. Little kids don't lie. If the lad corroborates your cockamamie story – fine and well. But if not, there will be a steep price to pay.

Yosef's ploy was perfect. The first thing he would do when he beheld Binyamin (a young man instead of a supposed, grade-school age child) was express disbelief. Of course the entire truth-seeking test was blown to smithereens. How dare they? As if the youngest brother, by dint of being the family baby, would not stoop to lying and subterfuge?

Alternatively, Yosef was sticking to the accusation of the siblings being espionage specialists. *You keep getting away with it, but not this time.* 'This time you will be tested. By the life of Paroah, you will never leave unless your little brother comes here.'

'Send an emissary and he will fetch your brother. You place yourselves under house arrest. I will determine whether what you say is true.' The man had it all figured out. The state was not willing to dispatch a courier nor were the brothers going to bring Binyamin. That would be counterproductive for the obvious reason that they would train the boy what to say. Perhaps that one brother was the ringleader. Rather the brothers would hire a third party to bring the boy to Egypt while they waited in prison for the child's return. He would be closely interrogated regarding the "sibling relationship" and their ostensible uprightness. 'If not – so help Paroah – you are spies.'

This plain verse reading also makes sense in terms of another question. By evoking Paroah's name in a solemn oath, did Yosef swear falsely? If so, it would be a profound lack of gratitude for the monarch who had catapulted him to his current position. A careful look reveals Yosef's true intent. He swore, in effect, that none of the brothers would leave Egypt unless they all agreed to the Binyamin test, which they did. Additionally, not all would be able to leave Egypt while waiting for Binyamin's arrival. One stayed back.

Let us examine Yosef's second oath. 'And if not – so help Paroah – you are all spies.' He swore that their claim to being twelve honest brothers is credible. The assertion read that if these men were not all siblings, then they were spies. That, too of course, was an undisputed fact.

The Torah does not record the brothers' response. Probably they were dumbfounded and incredulous that heinous charges had been leveled against them. 'And he placed them under house arrest for three days.' Revoking and restricting movement pending trial was common bill of fare in ancient times. Perhaps in the interim witnesses or testimony for either the defense or prosecution would clarify matters. Three days is a reasonable amount of time for the sides to produce admissible material.

Yaakov's sons maintained their right to remain silent. Prior to their summary judgment, Yosef reprieved them on the third day. 'And Yosef said to them on the third day: "Do this and save your lives. I fear The Almighty."' The man reiterated that he did not want to kill them. He did want to root out infiltrators.

Fifth *aliyah*

'If you are honest men, one brother will be incarcerated in your prison while you all bring famine relief to your households.'

The interrogation of their younger brother might break him down. Agreeing to the viceroy's terms was only advisable if they were honest. The man offered them special dispensation in exchange for a confession. Otherwise, lenient amended verification guidelines called on one brother to remain while all the others brought Binyamin. Yosef made sure to generously overcompensate for his leniency. Shimon would soon feel the effects of "push come to shove" on his own back. House arrest is an effective restraining order for ten men but not for one. Therefore, whoever stayed in Egypt would sit behind bars to prevent his escape. Yosef allowed that bringing Binyamin would be proof positive of their innocence. For the brothers, it was certainly preferable to an unpredictable intimidating interrogation. Unwilling to admit their guilt to the vacuous crimes, they took leave of Shimon who had been forcibly manhandled, chained, and carted off to prison before their eyes.

Besides the dream reenactment, Yosef had three other motives for bringing Binyamin to Egypt. The first was obvious and concerned reuniting with his only full brother. Seeing him would prove that his brothers did not kill or sell him as they had earlier conspired against Yosef. Second, Binyamin played prominently in the overall test designed to gauge their repentance. The upcoming sting with the goblet[31] probed their mettle. Would the brothers save or ditch him on account of his different mother? The last one revolved around his brothers' punishment. Binyamin, Yosef's surrogate, needed to replay their bogus crimes and sentencing. A Dotan replica maximized the potential for shame, regret and contrition for selling Yosef into ignominious Egyptian slavery.

Every act redid the fraternal treachery: measure for measure. Petty revenge had never been seriously contemplated. Yosef calculated and meted out justice to the hairsbreadth for purposes of catharsis. The process, like their original sin, was heart-rending for all. 'And each brother said to the other: "We are guilty on account of our brother. We saw his anguished soul when he begged us but we ignored him. Our present grief is the direct result."' Indeed the brothers' *mea culpa* resounded as it scrubbed a generation's stubborn stain. Three points of analysis provide a better understanding of their contrition's anatomy.

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31. Seventh *aliyah* below

Altruism One began with Yosef's poignant words that conveyed trust and empathy to his brothers. 'Bring famine relief to your households.' Observing kindnesses encouraged introspection. It was a painful counterpoint because they had failed to muster up common decency let alone assistance. Fearing heaven, a (seeming) stranger expressed sympathy for women and children he was not related to. They had failed Yosef, their own brother. In addition, he showed their families pity though he had never laid eyes upon them, never heard their hunger-induced wailing. Yosef's tearful full-volume Dotan screams were plainly heard and ignored. Also displaying mercy had been the man's initiative since the brothers dared not petition it. Rachel's eldest son had desperately begged for compassion. '**We are guilty**' for ignoring Yosef's pleas, tears and anguish. They understood that their pain's source could be traced directly back to Dotan's pit where callous torment had been inflicted.

Reflection Wobbly initially, a second realization grew steadily. At the outset, self-righteous indignation dominated their mindset. How dare this despicable tyrant trample our personal rights and freedoms with outlandish lies? Rethinking brought a different perspective and conclusion as they gained big picture objectivity. Yosef's words reverberated. 'I fear The Almighty.' They were duly impressed with his levelheaded manner of dealing with their issue, his wisdom, and counsel. Repentant processing began as they reexamined their actions expressed as 'what did Hashem do to us?' Combating pagan pop philosophy whose default mode attributes all bad things to happenstance, the brothers resisted the blame-game trap. Their verbalized admission rejected the false premises predicated on the mere random ranting of a deranged lunatic. '**We are guilty**.' Providence's hand guided events. It made sense that just as they had sold Yosef to strangers, so too, they were being forced to select one brother and place him in enemy hands. Cruelty had bred cruelty. Shame filled them. They were hoisted by their own petard, built from their own contrived, baseless and brutish prejudice.

Humility The brothers grappled with the actual spy charges. How did the accuser arrive at these baseless conclusions? Is anything more insulting and frustrating than listening to a State's charges that have no basis whatsoever in reality? Introspection brought them to decipher the personal meaning. It taught them the empathy that had eluded them with their own brother. Recall how they sentenced Yosef to the Dotan pit and sat down to eat a meal. Smug

and arrogant, these self-appointed New Class Supreme Court justices patted themselves for performing flawlessly. Yosef's bloodcurdling cries had been drowned out somewhere between a sumptuous meal's courses. The Egyptian trial recreated the coarse deafness and a denial chamber where no tears of pity penetrate. '**We are guilty**.' Despite the man's fear of heaven, he calls us spies.

One by one, the brothers came to realize that something Divine was afoot. Two brothers nudged them along at first. Reuven took some swings at cracking their concrete hearts when he railed. 'And Reuven responded to them saying: "Did I not tell you to refrain from wronging the boy?"' Watered-down rote formulas like "*We are guilty*" insult the truth. He meant that the Hebrew word translated here as guilt (*asham*) suggests an inadvertent and accidental sin.

The brothers clung to the lesser implications of their acts. Maybe guilt racked their collective consciences and so they took cover under convenient rationalizations such as temporary insanity and the like. Reuven gnashed as he reproved: yours was a willful and intentional misdoing. He elaborated that their transgression went beyond betraying a brother – Yosef was but a teenage youth. Had they considered the ramifications for their father?

Disgusted, Reuven smashed the last remnants of the brothers' great wall of lies. 'The price of his blood is being exacted.' Never mind fraternal bonds. They were murderers. He concluded that all of this had been Divine payback – pure and simple. Heads and hushed silence fell.

Yosef watched as more than just high drama unfolded. 'And they did not know that Yosef understood because of a translator's presence.' Since Yosef regularly employed a translator they assumed he did not speak Hebrew. Thus when they spoke and Yosef moved closer to hear them, they ignored him thinking there was no reason to curtail the conversation or even whisper. Plausibly, the translator observed their anguish and attempted to provide comfort. Seeing the translator among them, they thought Yosef was incapable of understanding their discussion.

Yosef turned away and cried when he heard their confession. Their complete atonement allowed for no other way out. Their transgression's magnitude pounded unrelentingly. 'And he turned from them and wept. He returned to them and spoke to them.' Yosef assuaged his distraught brothers. Perhaps he witnessed the process of the brothers selecting which one of the ten would be jailed and relieved them of their predicament.

'And he took Shimon from among them, shackling him before their eyes.' Calculatedly, he had Shimon forcibly removed. Helplessness best describes Yosef at seventeen years of age. At that time, the dumb, smirking and nodding brothers had watched the Midianites cuff and drive him away. Sinking feelings now engulfed them.

Shimon, the chief executioner of Yosef's sale, was dragged to a hellhole. For the first time, Yosef learned that Reuven had no part in the Dotan fiasco. Justice and punishment were being served. As if the man was some kind of a giant reflecting pool, the brothers began sensing his knack for spotlighting their dirty, dormant secrets.

'And Yosef gave instructions to have the brothers' payments returned in the grain-filled sacks.' Recall that Yosef's intention was designed to torment but not wrong them. Giving them ample provisions for the long road home played a role as well as topping their sacks with grain. He did not want to risk the brothers not returning to Egypt on account of depleted cash so Yosef placed money in their bags. Outright gifting could have served that purpose but by withholding the surprise, he maximized their consternation. Measure for measure, as discussed, dictated every little detail. The brothers' intent was sinister but what resulted from their act was salvation.

'And donkeys carried their provisions as they left from there.' The high-pitched drama that began with the man's accusations shadowed the brothers' trek home. When they arrived at the first innkeeper's place and opened the sacks, a startling stash awaited them. 'And one of them opened his sack to give his donkey food at the rest stop and saw his money. It was at the sack's opening.' One brother discovered the money but the others did not. Dread, however, gripped them all. 'And he said to his brothers: "My money has been returned and it is here in my bag."' Panic filled them as they deliberated and asked: 'What is this that Hashem has wrought?' No consensus emerged but debate formulated this: Was it Heaven's grace or jail's harbinger? Dashing to their bags, the other brothers opened them but did not find money. Probably Yosef's attendant inadvertently forgot to bury the money of the brother who discovered it now as he had with everyone else's. No matter. Their shock would come when they arrived home and emptied their grain.

Back in Canaan, the brothers debriefed Yaakov. 'And they told him all that which transpired with them saying: "The man, the ruler over the land, spoke

harshly to us. He accused us of spying out the land."' Purposely editing out the more harrowing parts like spending three days under wraps and Shimon's hard knocks, they whitewashed it as if he stayed back for good measure. The brothers pinned their hopes on a cleaner, antiseptic version inducing their father to accept Yosef's terms for bringing Binyamin.

At first Yaakov reacted with equanimity. He did not love the idea of his beloved and youngest son making a long journey, but had not ruled it out either. He needed some time to mull it over. But then the brothers unloaded and spilled out their gunnysack contents. Hard thumping silver crashed to the arid ground. Grain-silver… grain-silver… grain-silver…'And it was when they emptied their sacks. *Gasp*. Each man found his silver in his bag. And they saw their silver – they and their father. And they feared.' Their eyes stared at eight glittery silver mounds atop golden grains. The peculiar-appearing pyramids abruptly altered everything. Catatonic stares and puzzled recriminations ricocheted among the family members.

Binyamin's name was the first thing out of Yaakov's mouth. *He* was not going anywhere. The Egyptian grain commissioner planned and sprung a mighty trap and Yaakov knew it. There would have to be some other way for the brothers to prove their integrity.

> *'And Yaakov their father said to them: "You bereave me.*
> *Yosef… gone…*
> *and Shimon… gone…*
> *You think you will take Binyamin!?*
> *Why does everything happen to me..."'*

Yaakov had experienced enough bereavement as he contemplated more. Horror. Crying, he could make no sense of the latest in a series of catastrophes. Not one but two sons taken away.

No one would lay a finger on Binyamin. His murky world was blurred but not regarding Rachel's youngest son. Unrecorded and unplugged, Yaakov shrieked venom and poison towards his nine sons. Why is this happening *to me*? Why does it not happen to you and your children?

Foolishly, Reuven attempted to comfort his father while the wound oozed freshly. 'And Reuven said to his father: "My two sons you kill if I do not bring him back to you. Put me in charge of him and I will bring him back to you."' Reuven's words which were designed to give his father a high comfort level

widely missed. Nothing would convince him that this grandee had a reliable and credible side. As for his flesh and blood collateral, that was sickening if not pitiful. From Reuven's asinine suggestion, it was clear that the situation had unhinged everyone. What was he thinking? Of course Reuven never thought seriously for a second about such a psychopathic outcome. He meant to bristle confidently that his trust in that Egyptian would not be misplaced.

Squabbling over the commissioner's trustworthiness mattered little, and Yaakov was not going to waste time over it. He stuck to what he knew. 'And he said: "My son is not going with you."' The patriarch peevishly adjourned the meeting by talking about dangerous roads and highway robbers. 'His brother is dead and he alone remains. Disaster on the road you go on can happen, downing me in eternal bereavement.' Of course there is no way to prevent disaster. By nature it is spontaneous and unpredictable. Doubtless his words were a ploy to protect Binyamin. Road rage was not Yaakov's fear. His dread was focused on an anonymous, wacky, and whimsical ruler.

Everyone needed a time-out and breathing space but an impatient and indiscriminating famine gripped Canaan impertinently. 'And it was when they finished eating the grain brought from Egypt that their father said to them: "Return and buy for us a bit of food."' Dire straits were responsible for broaching the taboo subject. (Obviously, Yaakov's children needed more than a bit of food for their families. The patriarch requested that his sons pick up a modest quantity for him as well.)

Yehudah broke the bad news to his father. 'And Yehudah said to him: "The man was emphatic with us saying: 'You will not see my face if your brother is not with you.' "' The lead brother spoke unequivocally. No Binyamin, no buying trip. The commissioner spelled out specified and agreed upon terms. Yehudah knew it was an impossible call but Yaakov would have to decide between managing Canaan's worst dry spell and accepting the administrator's conditions. There would absolutely be no renegotiating.

Yaakov trembled when he visualized a chomping human-beast demonizing his queued children in the bread line. 'And Yisrael said: "Why have you wronged me to divulge to the man about another brother?"' When did his sons become such *yentas*? Yaakov demanded to know. They were at fault, it seemed, when they provided unsolicited information about being twelve siblings, servants to the viceroy. How did the man skip from siblings to spy rings?

That jump they too could not make out. The brothers defended themselves by recasting the story's entire tenor as the man peppered probing questions.

'Where we were from?'
'Is your father still alive?'
'Do you have a brother?'

'How were we supposed to know that he would demand bringing him [Binyamin] down?' Perhaps the brothers meant that the viceroy's questions seemed to lead them toward divulging Binyamin's existence, even if they could not quite explain why.

Back and forth Yaakov and the brothers circled. No vantage brought them perspicacity. Yet the famine marched on. Agreed: The man seemed to string them along. Agreed: The brothers had no idea where his fishing took them. Agreed: The time to act would not wait. But how?

Yehudah tired of the pointless rehashing and found a way out of the impasse. 'And Yehudah said to Yisrael his father: "Send the youth with me and we will get up and come back. We will live and not die. We and you and also our children."' Yehudah's logic was impeccable. He correctly dissected the situation saying that there were two courses of action. Sitting in Canaan was sure disaster; no one survives starvation. Traveling to Egypt represented a calculated risk even figuring in this loose-cannon commissioner. His suggestion made sense – releasing Binyamin would be like sending a dead man walking. Nothing to lose.

'I offer a pledge. Take what you want if I do not return him to you. If I do not set him before you again, I will have sinned against you all of my days.' He staked much on accomplishing his mission. More he could not do except express frustration. 'Had we not stalled, we would have returned already twice.' Yehudah enthused optimism that neither force nor foe would thwart them.

When presented the predicament and solution in Yehudah's logical terms, Yaakov acquiesced. He adjured them to utilize his time-tried tools: gifts and prayer.[32] 'And Yisrael their father said to them: "If so, this you must do. Take of the land's finest in your bags and bring the man a gift. [A selection of] some balm, honey, gum, ladanum, nuts, and almonds."' In addition, the brothers packed enough money to pay for the new purchases as well as repay for the old ones.

32. See chapter eight, first and second *aliyot*

Binyamin and his brothers readied to embark as their father offered a prayer. 'The Almighty should grant that the man be merciful to you. He should send you back together with your other brother and Binyamin. As for myself, when I was bereaved I was utterly bereft.' Yaakov's vanquished tone was plain to hear. Note also that the old man did not pray directly for Hashem's intervention. Given his fairly low opinion of his sons at this point, he doubted that they would merit Heavenly assistance. Hopefully, though, the grandee's good graces would pity them. Wallowing in bereavement, Yaakov did not even consider relief for himself. Yosef's disappearance extinguished any *joie de vivre* he ever had.

The brothers had not all been together for twenty-two years. Yesteryear's dream stuff was about to stretch complicated matters to the limit. 'And the men took that gift, and the double payment in hand together with Binyamin. Arising they descended to Egypt and stood before Yosef.'

Sixth *aliyah*

'And Yosef saw them with Binyamin and he said to his butler: "Bring the men home and slaughter, then prepare a meal for the men will dine with me at noon."'

After seeing his brothers, Yosef requested his *charge d'affaires* to bring them to his palace for brunch. Government obligations did not allow for an earlier meal due to a hectic morning schedule. 'And the man did as Yosef ordered. And the man ushered the men into Yosef's house.' Breakfast or supper, it really did not matter because the very last thing they expected was a plush palace invite. Bracing for the worst scenario the brothers envisioned trouble. 'And the men feared because they were taken to Yosef's house. And they said: "On account of the returned money in our sacks we are being taken, to maliciously accuse us and pounce upon us. He wants to take us as slaves [working] with our donkeys."' Instinctively they attributed the unusual treatment to their refunded money. Grand theft, fraud, tax evasion – it was inconsequential. The man in his multi-capacities as prosecutor, jury and judge did not have to follow legal due process. He adjudicated or confiscated with a little finger's motion.

Without prompting, Yaakov's sons' conversation turned to the inexplicable cash caper. They aimed at making an earnest and amicable first impression. 'And they approached Yosef's *charge d'affaires*, speaking with him at the house's entrance.' They offered to explain the money mix-up. The man's chief attendant

heard how they noticed that it was precisely the same coins they had paid with. The brothers had no knowledge of it until they reached Canaan. Discretion dictated slightly changed factual details – one of them had already discovered the money at the inn. Fault might be found in his continuing the trek home instead of about-facing to return the money. Apologies for the delay followed. Dire family straits prevented an earlier return. At any rate they had ample funds to cover the original debt as well as new money for today's grain purchase.

The assistant assured the brothers that their invitation to the viceroy's palace had nothing to do with money. 'And he said: "You are all fine. Do not fear. You and your forefathers' Almighty One placed a treasure inside your sacks. I have received your payments." Shimon was released to them.' The man sensed their deep apprehension seeing that they would not even set foot in the palace. They would surely resist a descent to Shimon's dungeon to greet him and escort him out. The viceroy's valet therefore sent Shimon out to them. To hear that the authorities harbored no intention to roll them coupled with seeing Shimon greatly gladdened their hearts. Add to those tidings the opportunity to dine in royal splendor – it was all so surreal.

Treated like visiting dignitaries, the brothers entered the palace. 'And the man brought the men into Yosef's house and gave them water. They washed up and were given provender for their donkeys.' Refreshed and relaxed the brothers prepared their dignified host's gift meticulously as they were told about sharing a meal with the viceroy. In due time, the V.P. wrapped up his day's work and came home. Greeted by his brothers' subservient bows and gifts, the lord beheld his brothers. 'Yosef greeted them.' Niceties were returned. 'And he asked about their old father whom they had spoken about. "Is he still alive?" And they answered: "Our father your servant is well. He is alive." And they bowed and prostrated.' One bow upon seeing the man again had sufficed. This second round showed appreciation for his concern. It greatly honored them.

Warm smiles quickly turned icy. Looking at Binyamin – an adult – took the commissioner by scurrilous surprise because he feigned to have been deliberately lied to. He fully expected to investigate a school-aged boy, unversed in mendacity. Did they forget their agreement and promise? Losing patience, the man demanded an explanation. Fitful distrust pervaded when in front of him stood a full-grown, strapping and handsome man and no boy. Not a whit of amusement crossed the man's reddening face. 'And he glanced and

saw Binyamin his brother, son of his mother.' He mocked. 'Is this the *lad* that you told me about?' Yosef's ranting, inadvertently, overly praised his brother's looks and physique. In an effort to ward off the evil eye, he offered a riposte. 'And he said: "May Hashem bless you, my son."

Seventh *aliyah*

'And Yosef hastened as he got choked up on account of his brother. He wanted to cry. He came to his chamber and there he cried.'

Binyamin's fearful and dreaded facial expressions stirred Yosef's emotions. The other brothers had wronged him but what had that to do with Binyamin? Yosef's insides churned uncontrollably. A barrage of tears could not be suppressed any longer so he turned around, left the anteroom and went out. River reservoirs of raw hurt rolled down his cheeks. Earlier when Shimon had been shackled, to be sure, his sentiments moved him to tears, but that did not require more than a repositioning of his head. This crying was of a different caliber.

Meal time came after Yosef gained composure. The Torah is clear that segregated eating took place. Since protocol dictated dignity, the viceroy dined alone as it would be an affront to share from the same dishes as commoners. Theoretically, at least, nothing would have prevented the Hebrew brothers joining the Egyptian attending staff other than diverse dietary habits. Recall that the Canaanite carnivores disgusted local palates. A clue to the Jews eating meat can be learned when earlier Yosef bid his kitchen staff to 'slaughter and prepare' for the afternoon repast. The separation solved the locals' queasiness. Another surprise was in store for the brothers.

'And they got seated before him (Yosef) according to age ranging from oldest to youngest. Each brother marveled to the other.' Once they reach adulthood, men's ages within a certain range are indistinguishable. The brothers wondered how he had perfectly pegged each one's years.

§§§

The major theme of this *parashah* as well as the upcoming *Parashat Vayigash* requires a systematic treatment. Since Binyamin is a focal point in the unfolding narrative, the discussion begins with him. Why did Yosef train all of the focus upon him by planting the goblet in his sack? Was anything crueler?

Two central points have been noted above.

POINT I: Measure for Measure

Yosef's underlying premise took his family's best interests at heart. Selling him into slavery was, of course, a mammoth crime. Crime begets punishment. Hence he hatched a plan whereby the brothers would receive payment in this world and not the next one. Judaism presupposes that heavenly compensation, in general, is always more exacting.[33] Calculated for precision, he identified three wrongs that screamed for justice:

- **False Accusation**: The brothers egregiously accused Yosef of talebearing and slander.
- **Cruelty**: Dotan's underground cell had been unwarranted detainment and imprisonment.
- **Betrayal**: Aggravated counts of kidnapping and enslavement shook the bedrock of family values and societal undergirdings.

These three categories, as shameful, despicable and painful as they were, did not ultimately harm Yosef. An incongruous situation arose whereby the brothers intended and acted in an unequivocally damaging manner yet the "victim" (Yosef) suffered no harm. In *Parashat Vaychi* it is summed up this way. 'And you thought to do me evil but the Almighty meant good.'[34] Yosef sought and recreated three corresponding, retributive repartees: a) falsely leveled spy charges, b) binding and imprisoning Shimon, and c) sentencing Binyamin to slavery.[35]

Bear in mind that Binyamin's circumstances best resembled Yosef's and made him the very best understudy. Both were the only sons of Yaakov and Rachel; both were sent by their father to check on/assist the other brothers. In Yosef's absentia, Binyamin perforce substituted and played his older brother's surrogate in the reenacted farce of slavery. Lastly, both brothers not only received commuted sentences but also emerged better off.

POINT II: Transformation – Truth and Reconciliation

Flushing out the truth needed Binyamin's presence (read: a scapegoat). One father and four wives made for interesting dynamics, to say the least. Further complicating matters cropped up when one of the wives – Rachel – had been

33. See e.g. BT *Yoma* 87a
34. Chapter twelve, sixth *aliyah*
35. See chart in fourth *aliyah* above

the most beloved. Favoritism is a breeding ground for undesirable things but it does not have to be turned into a battleground. Yosef was determined to find out: Was the fight still raging? Had twenty-two years ended the civil war?

Binyamin was Rachel's youngest (and ostensibly only) son. A delicately planted goblet would reveal the answers to Yosef's conundrum. How far would the brothers go to save his neck? A master plan took everything into account except one little, possible glitch. What if the brothers felt that Binyamin did something that warranted punishment? The test failed if they perceived that he *actually did* pilfer the goblet. It was not as farfetched as one might imagine. Rachel had, after all, pinched her father's *teraphim*.[36] It was legitimate to wonder: Was Rachel's act a one-time offense or an unconscionable trait that somehow got passed down a generation? Confounding factors had to be controlled if Yosef's experiment were to work.

A solution presented itself. Yosef planted money in Binyamin and the other brothers' sacks. Thus while the goblet isolated and incriminated Binyamin, the retrieved monies canceled out his isolation. Either they all stole, or none did. By deduction, if they, and by extension Binyamin, were innocent, then something else was afoot. This had to be the work of a raving tyrant. What would the brothers do in that case?

The brothers did not and could not have known how high Yosef put the stakes. Sky-high. This was Yosef's end-game and everything hinged on it. If they passed this test by standing united by their brother's side then their transformation proved their repentance, and their acceptance and love for Rachel's children. The man would shed his costume and reveal his true identity. Yaakov would be summonsed to Egypt.

On the other hand, if the brothers jilted Binyamin in his time of need, Yosef's wrath would come out in bolts of fire, crushing them mercilessly one by one. By all measures this was an exquisite dish prepared by a master chef.

§§§

Dinner was served. One imagines a joyous and celebratory meal, if just a little standoffish since the brothers had no idea of the host's identity. Yosef's high tension mingled with great hope. 'And he took portions for those before him but

36. Chapter seven, sixth *aliyah*

added fivefold to Binyamin's presents. And with him they drank until inebriation.' The time to pack up and leave had come. Yosef gave an attendant his cue.

'And he commanded his *charge d'affaires* saying: "Top off to full capacity the men's sacks with food and place money in each one's satchel."' Yosef's generosity did not measure in kilos but instead he wanted the staff to maximally stuff the bags. 'At dawn's first light the men with their donkeys were sent out.' When arriving in Egypt, the brothers had feared that a palace detour foreboded enslavement and animal requisitioning. The verse proves that they were mistaken. No one or nothing was confiscated or even delayed. By early morning they traveled.

Yosef's timing, too, had been preplanned. By beginning the experiment at daybreak it minimized the locals witnessing the unfolding drama. Barely allowing the brothers city exit, Yosef alerted his assistant, bidding a halt to the brother's escape. 'Arise and pursue the men. And when you reach them ask them saying: "Why did you repay bad for good?"' In contrast to typical loud chase scenes after robbers, Yosef's orders were different. Again, to maximize discretion, an assistant did not holler "Thief, thief! Stop!" but instead demanded an explanation for their inappropriate and unwarranted behavior only after apprehending them.

Note three accusations:

- *Ingrates* The alleged crime took place under the auspices of the hosting commissioner. Does not even a common pickpocket hesitate before stealing from the hand that feeds him? 'Why did you repay bad for good?'
- *Imbecility* The stolen object was more than nostalgic, it was Yosef's mainstay. How clumsy and miscalculating to swipe his favorite draft mug. 'Behold this is what my master drinks from.'
- *Nerve* That goblet played a central role in the magnate's mystique. What would a wizard do without his wand? Yosef feigned divining with his notorious chalice. 'And he divines magic with it.'

Digressing from the assistant's indignation (presently concluded with the third charge) an interesting question is raised. Did Yosef really indulge in

occult practices that the Torah forbids?[37] To answer, it appears that he made some type of goblet usage. The Sages[38] offer dispensation in certain cases, wherein one's good fortune can be traced to the onset of an association with a particular item or person.[39] This is deemed harmless as long as one does not make practical decisions based on that association. The *parashah*'s final verses suggest that the cup's significance for Yosef was real. It epitomized his path to power, and was therefore a cherished memento which was assumed to be an omen of prosperity. Stealing the silver chalice thus suggested the usurpation of Yosef's power and prestige. Indeed, it was the viceroy's scepter.

Though the verses do not explicitly say that the object being discussed by the interlocutor was *the goblet*, it had been implied. 'That which my master drinks from…' Implied enough to bring quadriplegia upon the brothers when they heard the charge sheet read. Numb and in a quandary was where the brothers found themselves. Ill-affording the luxury or legal right of remaining silent, these defendants had to speak up. 'And they said to him: "Why does my master speak these things? Heaven forefend! Far be it for your servants to do thusly."

Though the brothers were unclear as to why they were being accused, it was paramount to clarify matters. 'Look! The money we found in our sacks' mouths we returned to you from Canaan. How could we possibly have stolen silver or gold from your master's mansion?' Did they not refund the monies from their first buying trip? Three factors militated that they should pocket the previously discovered money:

- Even if they had found it in the street, they could keep it.
- The mysterious money was *in their satchels*. According to *halachah* a man's property aids in his acquisition of an object.[40]
- Returning a lost object after a long period and schlepping it from a different place is much more difficult than giving it back immediately to someone nearby.

37. *Vayikra* 19:26
38. BT *Chullin* 95b
39. The concept here is akin to the custom of celebrating marriages at the beginning of a month, when the moon waxes (see *Rema Even HaEzer* 64:3), or eating particular foods on Rosh Hashanah with positive associations (BT *Keritot* 6a, *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayyim* 583:1).
40. BT *Bava Batra* 85a

Hence how could they have possibly:

- 'Stolen
- From your master's house
- Silver or gold.' (which is far more egregious than keeping the money they brought back)

Then they backed their confident words with a firm, if drastic guarantee. 'If you find it among your servants – put that man to death. Furthermore, the others will remain as slaves.'

The prosecution called for calm and rejected the excessive collective punishment. 'And he said: "Your words are true. He who has it shall be enslaved and the rest [declared] innocent."' The accuser accepted the brothers' words and readily conceded their honest reputation, especially with regards to the first money ordeal. However the culprit, if apprehended, would be duly charged. Besides, the man added, they could not really know if one of the eleven brothers snuck the object undetected. Finally, he said that permanent bondage fit the crime – measure for measure. Since the thief purported to steal the goblet – a symbol of His Excellency's rulership – it followed that the guilty party would be his serf forever.

Searching commenced. 'And quickly [they] lowered their gunnysacks to the ground as each man opened his own gunnysack.' A methodical inspection took place. To conceal the ploy, 'he commenced with the oldest and concluded with the youngest. And the goblet was found in Binyamin's sack.'

Obviously, the brothers saw through this lame subterfuge but that did not lessen the situation's gravity. 'And they rent their garments. Each man loaded his donkey and returned to the city.' Their denouement sped rapidly. They were ushered into Yosef's house, bowing to him. 'And Yosef said to them: "What is this act that you have done? Did you not know that a man such as I certainly divines?"' He meant that every personage attributes good charm to some object. It was a scathing attack, and it implicated every single one of them.

Yaakov's sons pleaded guilty to a crime they did not commit. 'And Yehudah said: "What can we possibly say to my lord? What can we speak? What is the point in justifying ourselves? Hashem has found your servants' sin. We are servants to my master – we and the one with whom the goblet was found."' Yehudah intimated that had he been the viceroy's equal, he would have made it quite clear whose fault this whole debacle was. As things stood,

he dared not speak to his superior. The brothers could have proven their innocence as they had for their pursuer, but they were smart enough to realize that a greater force discovered and pronounced their guilt. In such cases, it is pointless to mount any defense, let alone a serious one. Spokesman Yehudah expressed everyone's opinion with dignity and aplomb. It was futile to ask the man for a fair proceeding, especially considering his recognizable role in the rump trial.

Yehudah stood to make a final remark. He professed innocence on behalf of his brothers. He wanted the man to hear for himself that whatever crime they may have perpetrated it had nothing whatsoever to do with His Highness. Hashem has found your servants guilty in another totally unrelated matter. He alone deemed it appropriate to punish here and at this time.

'We are servants to my master.' Thus Yaakov's sons submitted eternal service to the man. Yehudah accepted their servitude as a *quid pro quo* comeuppance for selling Yosef into slavery. In that unspoken deed and apparently open heavenly ledger, everyone besides Binyamin conspired. The punishment of the youngest brother was only by way of association with the hardened felons. Hashem had decreed it. Yehudah's words emphasized Binyamin's virtue. The goblet was found in his bag but he did not steal it.

Yosef feigned to accept Yehudah's constructive criticism that implied a biased, rigged show trial and kangaroo court. The plutocrat offered to make amends. 'And he said: "Far be it from me to act thusly."' Taking a moral high road, he extended an overture that would certainly strike a fair chord. 'The man in whose hand was found the goblet will be my servant. And (the rest of) you take leave in peace to your father.' The V.P. echoed his assistant's earlier rejection of collective punishment. He admitted that he lacked the means to know if the goblet had been stolen. That is why he merely pronounced judgment on the man in whose possession rested the goblet. His deserved death sentence would be commuted to slavery due to a lack of guilt beyond reasonable doubt. Ten brothers spurned the viceroy's marching orders. Digging in, no one budged an inch.

This showdown was long overdue.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PARASHAT VAYIGASH

TRYST ON THE NILE

First *aliyah*

'And Yehudah approached him and said:
"The matter relates to me, my lord.
Please permit your servant to have a (private) word
with my master. And please do not be cross with your servant
because (my esteem) equates you with Paroah."'

The brothers had listened as the man ameliorated the punishment. With the exception of Binyamin, of course, everyone else was encouraged to return home. Yaakov's youngest son would remain in the viceroy's servitude. Yehuda appealed vigorously.

The Sages[1] envisage Yehudah assuming a combative posture, ready to lay bare his frustration with Yosef's fabrications. A more straightforward reading of the verses portrays Yehudah pleading for a deputy monarch's mercy. The petitioner faced two challenges: substantive and methodological.

His substantive strategy called for electing himself as his youngest brother's replacement. Yehudah was the self-appointed guarantor for his youngest sibling, and the fault for the sudden demise of their father on account of Binyamin's absence would lie squarely at his feet. Convincing the arbiter that this was a genuine hardship case, not a ploy to spring Binyamin from deserved incarceration, would require a recap of all that had transpired since their initial sojourn to Egypt.

His methodology took the legalistic procedural hurdles into account. 'And Yehudah approached him.' The situation demanded the utmost discretion. Humiliation hovered in each tentative step forward. Post-judicial

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 93:8

discussions in a judge's chambers raise suspicion and compromise integrity. The dossier had been concluded, signed and for all intents and purposes, duly recorded. How would it look if Yehudah publicly objected and petitioned the court to free a convicted thief, an anti-government saboteur? Wouldn't this magistrate's retinue and staff question this and declare a miscarriage of justice? Replacing an innocent man with a hardened criminal is, after all, scurrilous. If word got out that the merchants of Canaan finagled a switcheroo, the ramifications would undermine the man's reputation and integrity. Yehudah knew the stakes involved.

He begged a private talk with the man. In trepidation he said: 'Please permit your servant to have a (private) word with my master.' Yehudah sought privacy as the matter weighed most urgent, unpleasant, and, alas, insolent. Since this violated convention, an apology was in order. Approaching the bench blatantly trespasses boundaries. Plebeians, Hebrew ones at that, tread a most jagged precipice by thus doing. 'Please do not be cross with your servant' – for both the breach in courtroom etiquette and a most unseemly request.

Yehudah began by equating the Exchequer with Paroah. He sought to reassure the judge that his intent was certainly not to offend. That was as unthinkable as insulting the pharaoh himself. This complimentary assessment may have intimated broader judicial discretion. Typically, judges lack appellate authority. However, Yehudah correctly identified the accuser as more than a mere magistrate; he wielded royal prerogative. Ancient kings possessed divine right, invincibility. A slight bend changed not an iota of the regent's authority. On the contrary. It was an expression thereof.

'Did my master inquire of his servants: "Have you a (living) father or brother?"' Yehudah's rhetorical opening remarks were intended to engender trust. Since those details were unsolicited, the man must believe the testimony that followed as accurate and not fabricated. 'And we told my master that we have an old father and he has a young son. He had a brother who died. This left him, the lone remnant of his late mother. His father loves him.'

Yehudah emphasized the bond. Tracking the original premise of Binyamin's Egyptian sojourn, he reminded the grandee of the fateful sequence of events. 'And you said to your servants: "Bring him to me that I may see him."' The defense asked the prosecution to pay close attention. His Excellency had heard at that time of the close father-son relationship. *And that*

is what moved you to ask for Binyamin to make the trip! *You wished to see the liebling.* Surely, thinking and feeling men readily comprehend this hardship's profundity. Their separation would be insufferable, inconceivable. Yehudah reminded His Honor of more conversation that the Torah had not recorded. 'And we said to my master that the boy is not able to leave his father. If he leaves [he knows] his father will die.' Fully aware of this clutching and clinginess, Binyamin believed that a prolonged separation would kill his father.

Yehudah let things sink in before continuing. Forestalling the commissioner's obvious question – "*if that is the case, why on earth did you bring him?*" – Yehudah deflected his adversary's demurral. A direct quote followed. 'If your little brother does not come down with you, you will not see my face.' Note that the espionage charges were diplomatically sidestepped. Yehudah's tightrope walk did not need more slack.

Besides his emotive arguments, important insights were about to spill over. With the viceroy's firm if heart-wrenching new grain purchase proviso, the brothers took leave of Shimon and returned home. Describing Canaan hard hit by famine, Yehudah replayed his father's words. 'Return and buy for us a bit of food.' The man continued to listen as the defense evoked an old man's desperate stab for basic food staples. When confronted with this stipulation of Binyamin's descent, Yaakov replied: 'You know that my wife bore me two sons.' *Rachel was my one true wife and her sons are my primary ones. All of you are like sons of concubines compared to them.* 'One has departed from me.' *Sons, I've been suspicious about you boys for a long time. Maybe* YOU *killed him… You always protest and tell me I'm imagining things and he was devoured, but I'm really not convinced. Let's not argue about it.* 'I'll [go along with] say[ing] he was devoured.' *Whatever the truth may be* 'I have not seen him until now.'

Finally, a tired old man heard his sons' determination to fulfill the magnate's terms, and he relented. Yosef heard Yehudah retell his father's last words before watching Binyamin pack up for a journey to the unknown. 'If you also take this one from me, "catastrophe" will befall him. You will end my life in a terrible way.' Yaakov left no one guessing: If Binyamin does not return, each son will be held culpable for his youngest son's death.

Yehudah wrapped up. His *a fortiori* logic straddles the first and second *aliyot*. 'Consider. When I came to your servant, my father, the young man was not with us, and his soul was inextricably intertwined with his soul…'

Second *aliyah*

'It will transpire that when he sees that the lad is not there, he will perish. Your servants will have ended your servant, our father's life in grief.'

Yaakov lived and breathed for Binyamin, his last link to Rachel and Yosef. When Binyamin was safe at home, it was obvious to all the brothers that Yaakov and his coddled one were a fused unit of endless love. *My lord, I beg you. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. If Binyamin does not walk through my father's door...* was there a shadow of a doubt that Yaakov would take stock of the end of Rachel's progeny – crouch to his knees and collapse for the very last time? This was the conclusion not of one brother, but of each brother.

Yehudah mouthed the words found in one united heart and spoke for all. Something else was on his mind and only his mind. Yehudah's skin, more than the others, was on the line. He had promised Binyamin's safe passage. 'For your servant is surety on behalf of my father for the young man. If I do not return him to you (Yaakov) I will have sinned to my father unto the end of days. Therefore, please allow your servant to replace the lad as my lord's slave.' The grave consequences meant that Yehudah's punishment spanned this world and the next one. Compassion had formed the basis of his appeal. The targeted imagery of a mortally wounded father would persuade even the most jaded judge. Besides, he underwrote the man a deal sweetener: Superior servitude.

Whatever Binyamin could do, stout Yehudah pledged to do better. Talent and strength were not the only advantages he had over his younger brother. A purposeful incentive boosted his motivation. 'For how can I go up to my father without the lad? I cannot bear seeing calamity befall my father.' Returning home without Binyamin simply was not an option.

Pinpointed, Yosef's plan was marvelous in that it characterized each and every facet of his own sale and the events leading up to it. Methodically, its showdown defined Dotan's transgression. Reuven accurately called it willful; the culprits completely admitted their wrongdoing; Hashem's punishment was acknowledged and justified.

This maestro's crashing crescendo carried depth, range and pathos. Conducting and witnessing his brothers' *teshuvah* process, Yosef experienced

an emotional meltdown. While it would be Pollyannaish (and/or romantic) to assume that twenty-two years of hurt and resentment were patched up overnight, a major breakthrough had been made. Yosef's test did more than breathe new life into the patriarchal dynasty and theory of moral evolution. It cinched it.

Recall Yosef's three rectifications:

- Spy Charges
- Shimon's Incarceration
- Binyamin's Show Trial

And now, the finale:

- Yehudah's Yoke of Submission

Yehudah had been the last collective brother puzzle piece to fall. And fall to his knees he did. Did Yehudah not advise and negotiate Yosef's sale to the Midianites? Now he sprawled to the floor pleading to assume Binyamin's servitude upon himself.

Recall Yehudah's earlier admission to Tamar when he positively identified his signet, handkerchief, and staff.[2] That confession did bring a modicum of punishment, a down payment for the bloodied coat ruse to Yaakov[3] – a critical component in explaining Yosef's disappearance. The retribution was not perfect, though, because the realization that he had impregnated Tamar bore with it the good news of fatherhood, while Yaakov was being apprised that he had lost a child. Besides, all of the brothers had presented the bloodied coat to the bereft patriarch.

The principal payment for Yehudah now came due. 'Therefore, please allow your servant to replace the lad as my lord's slave. And the young man will go up with his brothers.'

'And Yosef could not restrain himself in the presence of his attendants. He commanded: "EVERYONE OUT! LEAVE ME!" And no man stood with him when Yosef revealed himself to his brothers. He cried, wailing uncontrollably.'

The catharsis thus far traced Yosef's brothers' metamorphosis. As for the arranger and engineer – how did he react to their personal growth as he witnessed them revisit and rethink their past mistakes?

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2. Chapter nine, fourth *aliyah*
3. The phrase הכר נא – 'recognize now' is used in both contexts.

- 'We are guilty on account of our brother.'[4] The man's hard shell softened, evidenced by his turning aside to shed a silent tear.
- 'And the men brought the gift.'[5] Although his crying then was primarily over Binyamin, Yosef was apparently touched by the gesture. The magnate sought privacy from where he wept. Baby steps brought him into their space.
- 'Lest I see my father's devastation.' Yosef's emotions sent him reeling, forcing him to oust his attendants.

The brothers locked in. *A most incongruous tryst*. Was that not where Yaakov's sons found themselves? Reconciliation reattaches victim and aggressor. It was the victim's turn to release the years, nay decades of pain and hurt of his brothers' betrayal. This much is known. Yosef's was no ordinary soul, his circumspection hardly fathomable. So much so that even losing control had been, well, controlled.

'A torrential crying was heard by the Egyptians; it was heard inside Paroah's palace as well.' The reunion's emotions had not brought on the reason for Yosef's sobbing. To be sure, that was to come later when they all embraced and kissed. What was this present voluble display? Yosef's staged performance took aim at the local audience. How? Remember, though the brothers had been part of Yosef's scheming, the Egyptians had no knowledge of what was afoot. Ordered to leave the chamber, his advisors did not skedaddle to the dining room for a snack or to the garden for a water-pipe. Their boss, Egypt's viceroy, was alone with strangers. Yosef counted on his trained staff and professional security agents huddling within earshot – just in case. Crying aloud signaled their boss' high regard for his long-lost brothers, men of distinction. Had Yosef not reacted so boisterously, it would have given the impression that these relatives were undesirables. Attuned guards may have anticipated their royal viceroy's relief at having these *schnorrers* shown the door.[6] Hence Yosef's prolific crying had been a concerted effort to underscore his long-lost brothers' prominence. Indeed, the regent was privileged and honored to have reconnected with his illustrious siblings. Why was this section recounted in

4. Chapter ten, fifth *aliyah*
5. Sixth *aliyah*, ibid.
6. This is reminiscent of Yaakov's concern vis-à-vis Esav meeting his long lost brother.

the Torah? Its inclusion frames Yosef's genius, presence of mind and not the least of which – exquisite histrionics.

Alone, churning, Yosef eyed his brothers and turned towards them. 'And Yosef said to his brothers: "I AM YOSEF! Is my father really still alive?"' This was not a question. That information had been gleaned earlier in their dialogue. His transition from man/magnate to Yosef/brother needed a *pareve* ice-breaker. Talk of their father fit well. Sensitively, he knew that if their relationship would be taken up from the dreaded point of the Dotan departure it would be a kick to his brothers' gut. Embarrassing the newly reunited brothers would only start out matters on the left foot. The initial greetings mercifully started with a less frazzling topic.

Yosef's usage of the possessive case ('my father') was not exclusive to imply that Yaakov was his and not their father. Instead, he asked them to level with him. Given that Yaakov had been inextricably bound to Yosef, did the separation kill him? Did Binyamin's present exit bring his demise? He had not anticipated his sibling's blank stare, silence, and confusion. Naturally there was so much information he wanted to learn. How were their mothers, sister, wives and children? But that would wait.

Fresh newsy tidbits from Canaan failed to materialize since a peep did not leave their lips. Yosef wondered: Did they think that somehow the name "Yosef" had come up in connection to the brothers and that this fellow was now playing a cruel trick?

Revelation: Take Two. 'And Yosef said to his brothers: "Please approach me." They came close. And he said: "I am Yosef your brother whom you sold to Egypt."' A closely guarded secret uttered left little to the imagination about the man's identity. Lest the brothers mistakenly think that mention of the act regurgitated his disdain, Yosef added 'your brother' conjuring sibling closeness. Motioning them to come within whispering range maximized discretion. The eavesdropping Egyptians never got wind of the story for obvious reasons. His identity established, Yosef resumed talking in order to revive his siblings – administer crisis intervention. Their vast embarrassment required treading tenderly. Next, Yosef applied a salve to soothe their stinging shame.

What follows are this *aliyah*'s concluding three verses. They represent the backbone of how Yosef managed, in a manner of speaking, to return eleven

brothers to his orbit and the patriarchal zodiac motif.[7] Not only did each word and verse bridge the lacuna by methodically interpreting two gap decades, but it also teaches readers sensible guidelines how to approach a major Jewish tenet: Divine Providence.

'Do not be melancholy or remorseful, because you sold me to here, for Hashem dispatched me ahead of you to sustain you.' Man should repent and regret harming others but need not feel down on himself when an act produces positive results – no matter how circuitous the trek. Resuscitating Yaakov's family was, to be sure, a very good thing. The next verse elaborated on the situation's economic precariousness.

'Two years of the famine have racked the region yet five more years (will ensue) whereby there will not be plowing or harvesting.' Yosef surveyed the first two years whereby the region eked out sustenance from a meager agricultural yield. That, *mon frère*, was the famine's festive times. Years Three to Seven would further exacerbate the area's state of emergency. Zero plowing and harvesting was where things were headed. Complete stagnation threatened Yaakov's family.

§§§

Behind the scenes, Divine pageantry guides men. Yosef encapsulated Hashem's Big Picture. As this subject is a keystone fundamental to Judaism, a brief treatment is devoted to the topic of Divine Providence vs. happenstance. Indeed, can man know and discern the difference between serendipity and Heaven's matrix? Ancient thinkers philosophize about the role of coincidence and randomness in historical events – big and small. What are the Jewish guidelines?

To be sure, coincidence (read perceived coincidence) does play a part in human day-to-day drama and doldrums. For example, when a man sets out to the souk to meet a friend and finds a wad of money – that is "random." No apparent correlation exists between these two unrelated events. At the other end of the spectrum, philosophic secularists and classicists admit that major happenings on a grand scale are attributable to a Master Mind. Great, sweeping forces of human destiny, they concede, have existential meaning and direction. Undeniable as well is the role of a higher purpose in nature. Man's intricate digestive system or eyesight, for example, point to a grand design. In

7. See chapter nine, third *aliyah*

matters of great import, one might perceive no cause and effect only due to a lack of broader perspective. A father might send his son to buy fruit from a vendor and then instruct a friend to toss a gold coin in the boy's path as he approaches. For the son, it is good luck. Yet from the father's perspective who staged it, there was design.

Jews posit that very often this is the case for individuals as well. People can "chance" upon an occurrence, when it was truly Creator coordinated.[8] Even actions that one seemingly chooses to take can, in truth, have been coordinated or prompted by Hashem in order to bring about a particular result. This belief system is evidenced and supported by verses in *Tanach*.[9] To summarize, human experience takes into consideration many factors. Some reflect man's free-choice and volition. Others emphasize Heavenly or Providential influences. Mortal, finite knowledge underestimates or ignores Providence's pivotal role in the Almighty's universe.

§§§

Utilizing this introduction, our discussion refocuses on Yosef's sale and subsequent rise to power. Was it merely, as the Rambam[10] writes, a stroke of good fortune? If so, then the brothers deserved punishment. By whom? According to the Sages,[11] Yaakov found out about his son's sale. Logic dictates that when Yaakov and Yosef were reunited, his father was provided the full details of how his wunderkind went from a family business CEO to superpower viceroy. Yet we seek Yaakov's chastisement of the tribes in vain. Why should they be pardoned because of Yosef's luck? As a corollary, if the act had been sinful did the brothers spend the rest of their lives humbled, afflicted and in fasting? And where was the smack-down from Hashem? If in fact the brothers did transgress what interest would the Torah take in publicizing an outright heinous episode without recording the deserving consequence? On the contrary, tradition relates to them as virtuous and noble people, through whom *Bnei* Yisrael trace their national role and affiliation forever after.

Rambam's approach is thus problematic. In *Parashat Lech Lecha* it was suggested that Avram's severed-animal covenants foretold of Jewish suffering

8. See also chapter five, third *aliyah*
9. Tehillim 37:33; *Mishlei* 21:1
10. *Moreh Nevuchim* II:48
11. Source not located

as punitive for Yosef's sale.[12] Critics of that approach rightly point out that the *Tanach* finds it reprehensible and untenable to assert that innocent children suffer on account of parental sin.[13] The Sages[14] attributing Rosh Chodesh's goat-offering as tribal atonement is not in line with the plain Torah understanding, despite the Rambam's elaborate explanation of a connection.[15]

On a basic level, it is preferable to learn that Yosef's sale came Providentially-ordered from The One Above. Yosef shot to power, and his family was saved. This makes sense (even for secularists) due to the sheer magnitude and potential devastation of the killer famine. Yosef correctly grasped the Divine schemata and therefore lightened his brothers' punishment to reflect only their willful, sinister planning. The actual execution of his sale did not require the brothers' chastisement since it had little to do with them. Hashem found in their fraternal enmity a ready tool for the execution of His Plan and He did not rebuke them for it. As men possessing freedom of choice, the brothers were enlisted and wrangled to perform prescient roles.

'As a river flows, so is a king's heart in Hashem's hand. He leads it to where He desires.'[16] Punishment had been doled out to them on account of their skewered machinations. Blind hatred and jealousy drove them to disgrace. To paraphrase the Sages[17]: When Heaven needs to inflict harm, it employs those already culpable to perpetrate it. Here, malice motored Yosef's enslavement. Of course, when Yaakov sent Yosef from Chevron's city limits, he could not have known what would transpire. Similarly, when the conspiring brothers threw him in a Dotan pit, they could not have known that a heavenly hitchhiker, if you will, presided over their prejudiced verdict. Yaakov (when he discovered the truth) did not take them to task for their actions since he too ascribed them to Heaven's dictate. Yosef told them 'Do not be melancholy or remorseful (precisely) *because* you sold me to *here*.' *Don't you see it, my brothers? My ending up in the right place at the right time is a clear indication that 'Hashem dispatched me.' So fret not!* The sale had been heavenly ordained because the

12. See chapter three, sixth *aliyah*
13. See *Yirmiyahu* 31:28; *Yechezkel* 18:2
14. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:14
15. *Moreh Nevuchim* III:46
16. *Mishlei* 21:1
17. BT *Shabbat* 32a

plan called for Jewish survival. That in turn called for Yosef's pivotal role. *The mother of all great relief efforts.*

Careful analysis is what Yosef demanded from his brothers. In case their shock made them forget the famine raging a few miles from Egypt's border, he jarred their memory. They heard reminders that two years of scant rainfall paled in comparison to what awaited. 'Two years of the famine have racked the region yet five more years (will ensue) whereby there will not be plowing or harvesting.' Not a green patch of pastureland whatsoever. The dire projections based on past poverty statistics gave the brothers pause to reflect upon their dismal prospects.

'The Almighty has dispatched me before you' to save the nation in two distinct ways. Yosef gave a sobering overview of a storm gathering momentum before presenting a way out. 'The Almighty has dispatched me before you so that you have something left in the land, and to provide life-giving sustenance for you. A huge salvation!' The first aspect of aiding Yaakov's family referred to preserving chattel. Not a single head of livestock would survive the great Canaan dry spell. The brothers heard the details of how Hashem's plan brought Yosef to a place where flocks range comfortably. Or perhaps 'have something left in the land' refers to the total assets on hand, factoring in the family's depleted savings. Two years emptied out their bank accounts so if Yosef had not been prodded to Egypt none of Yaakov's considerable wealth would have remained. That was not all.

The brothers heard a second area of life support provided by Yosef's sale – one that hit closer to home. The phrase 'to provide life-giving sustenance for you' had targeted them. Namely without an Egyptian base, Yaakov's descendants were all doomed. As grain reserves dwindled, the monarchy was certain to curtail sales to foreigners. That meant that even if the family would not have spent their cash reserves (which they certainly dented if not exhausted) there still would not be food to bring home to Canaan.

While not explicit, Yosef may have sensed some stoicism in their quizzical expressions as if to convey disregard for their personal safety. The chivalrous brothers would suffer silently. Choosing not to contend that point, Yosef asked poignantly if they intended for women and children to subsist on thin air as well? Admittedly an unpleasant way to be reunited after twenty-two years,

the brothers heard a calamitous assessment rattle on. Life would not be challenging in Canaan given the forecast; it would cease.

At present the family's population numbered a few dozen souls. That would change. Shortly, an unnatural explosion and infusion would wax exponentially. The brothers did not need Yosef to run the numbers for them. More children meant more mouths to feed. Prolificacy and drought don't mix. Yosef at Egypt's helm spelled out just how far Hashem's kindnesses went. 'A huge salvation!' conveyed that not only the current smallish influx to Goshen was covered but ample reserves for the burgeoning anticipated future growth were available. This escape from the claws of Canaanite death by starvation was huge, far more reaching than a few clan members' demise. Happenstance? Not a fat chance.

Third *aliyah*

'And now [understand that] you did not send me to here but rather Hashem. And He placed me as father figure to Paroah, master over his palace and ruler over all of the Land of Egypt.'

Yosef filled in a significant amount of heretofore missing as well as hazy details. Perhaps woozy from their brother's harrowing and tedious harangue, focus gradually replaced his siblings' shock. His second revelation had positively identified him as long-lost Yosef and somewhat softened their shame. His magnanimity paved the way for reconciliation. To be sure, they understood that Yosef fully exculpated them for their actions.

One last thing did rankle and haunt them. Stubborn, stinging guilt clung tight. The brothers needed further clarification about the big picture. Specifically, they failed to grasp how their despicable betrayal got whitewashed. Yosef addressed their probe so that they would not misconstrue and fail to bring Yaakov's family to Egypt for fear of entrapment and reprisal.

The brothers heard Yosef say that neither the sale nor its aftermath bespoke or brushed happenstance. By placing the main sale act, if you will, at Hashem's doorstep, then perforce, nothing subsequent was random. Working backwards, since an unprecedented famine was in the offing, and the family needed refuge, Heaven worked feverishly to position Yosef in Paroah's palace. He reiterated that his clutch recruitment wrought all this. A saving grace of this caliber – did

they have the slightest doubt that Hashem engineered this feat? Higher reasoning plotted a glorious, if intricate chart. From Chevron's hallowed crevices to Dotan's harrowing pit to Paroah's plush palace – civilization had been saved.

Yosef urged them not to misconstrue. Bolded and underscored, he declared: 'And now (understand that) *not you* sent me to here but rather Hashem.' He alluded to the very dimension of this mega-event. Divine, not mortal hands shaped it. Eventually, internalization occurred. Can the truth not, on occasion, appear bizarre? Does Hashem's plan not incorporate human marionettes, if need be, to preserve a universe?

Note Yosef's three delineating titles offsetting the brothers' wiles. He is called:

TITLE	BROTHERS' INTENT
FATHER FIGURE i.e. a mentor and guide, to Paroah	Stripping Yosef of his favored-son status
MASTER OVER HIS PALACE Yosef was provided with creature comforts in Paroah's employment	Undermining Yosef's preferential treatment that allowed him to sit comfortably at home with Yaakov while they sun-baked pasturing flocks
RULER over all of Egypt	Attempting to dethrone him by thwarting his perceived menacing, condescending airs[18]

Dispelling the last vestiges of doubt, Yosef said in so many words: Random dice throws do not fall like this – it is statistically nil. Numerate, rational thinkers in possession of their full faculties cannot fail to behold Hashem's Providence.

Following his soothing seminar, Yosef urged action. 'Quickly go up to my father and tell him: "Thus says your son, Yosef. Hashem has placed me as Egypt's overlord. Come down to me and do not tarry."' The brilliant analysis and reconciliation, though welcomed, were not the main things. Saving Yaakov had been the goal all along and this was a race that could ill-afford delay. Yosef explained that his obligations precluded him from personally escorting his father.

18. See chapter nine, first *aliyah* – 'Will you rule over us? Subjugate us?'

Famine or feast, Yosef anticipated his father's concerns about coming to Egypt. 'And I will situate you in the Land of Goshen where you will be close to me. You, your children and grandchildren as well as your flocks, herds and all that you possess [will live in Goshen].' Egypt's city life had more than just antipathy towards Hebrews and shepherds. The royal district was rife with intrigue, crime, lechery and senselessness. Yaakov's values, to put it mildly, were not a good fit. Distant and pastoral Goshen solved those problems. Yosef propounded three benefits to the area:

- *Proximity* Adjacency meant that Yosef could visit weekly.
- *Expanse* Ample countryside for Yaakov's multi-generations and sizeable chattel. Yosef alluded to Chevron's mountainous landscape that lacked sufficient pasturing. Had that not set off Yosef's sale in the first place, landing him in Shechem's meadows? Goshen's sprawling acreage facilitated access to green pastures and guaranteed that no family member would have to travel in search of distant fields.
- *Livelihood* 'I will provide for you there.' Yosef could support the family within Egypt's borders. That promise could not be made if Yaakov remained in Canaan. Paroah would certainly look askance, if not outright veto, valuable Egyptian grain being shipped out. Even if Yosef sought to send supplies to Canaan, with the famine's increased intensity, road conditions amidst desperadoes endangered regular routing. Given Yosef's prognosis of a prolonged blight, Goshen made sense.

Another thing. 'Lest you, your household and possessions be vanquished.' Recall how Yaakov sternly berated his sons regarding *parnassah*.[19] Now Yosef squarely addressed this issue from a different perspective. Was it degrading for Yaakov to accept Yosef's handouts? Would not every father cringe at such an unnatural prospect? The parameters can be gleaned from the Torah's word choice. "Vanquish" is, obviously, a most extreme exigency. Yosef taught that there is no shame for a father to accept a son's support when the alternative meant certain death. The ravages of famine strike indiscriminately and do not reflect or imply a breadwinner's inadequacy.

Yosef did not delude himself regarding his assessment. There was no novelty here, only plain talk. The brothers could have arrived at these conclusions by themselves. When they reached their father, Yosef knew that the case

19. Chapter ten, fourth *aliyah*

would be presented cogently and as if these sentiments came from their own observations. This was true in general but especially regarding his meteoric ascendancy to power.

'And behold your eyes and my brother Binyamin's eyes see that my mouth is speaking to you.' Yosef understood that his brothers' failure to recognize him heretofore was because they never saw need to study his facial features. But upon his revelation, surely they would notice giveaway identity marks. Binyamin would certainly have his full brother's visage etched deep in his memory. Yaakov would have a hard time disbelieving his words.

Another angle: 'Behold your eyes and my brother Binyamin's eyes see' all my wealth and prestige. 'I am telling you this with my own mouth' – Yosef stressed that eyewitness accounts are no mere hearsay. Reticent to show the brothers walls of awards, trophies, and recognition with which he had been decorated, Yosef kept that matter brief. 'Let another man praise you – not your own mouth.'[20]

Yaakov should have absolutely no reason to doubt his eleven sons who likely saw the translator – formerly employed – step aside. Hebrew flowed from Yosef's mouth. Binyamin who had been ignorant of his brother's sale (and thus would not have been swayed by its revelation) was now similarly enjoined to take part in convincing Yaakov of the trek's necessity. No record in the Torah shows how long these few verses took to hit their mark.

Revelation one, revelation two, discourse, disbelief, discourse two, confusion, persuasion, belief, mission. Heady things they were. It was the heart's turn. 'And he hugged his brother Binyamin's shoulders and cried. And Binyamin cried on his shoulders.' Naturally, Yosef's first bear hug swathed Binyamin. Their anguish was brought to the fore as they met, sobbing over so many missing years of mutual enrichment.

In terms of human triumph, Yosef's forgiveness matched his brothers' contrition. 'And he kissed all of his brothers and cried on them.' Twenty-two years had pent up a lifetime of feelings, pain, displacement, sorrow. Receded and subconscious emotions spilled out intensely.

Insightfully, the Torah does not mention the brothers wailing. Did they? Probably not. Shame thwarts tears. For them – the betrayers – reconnecting took time. No longer stunned in Yosef's presence, they were able to converse

20. *Mishlei* 27:2

with him. 'And afterwards *his brothers* spoke with him.' Words trumped and prevailed over humiliation. More words evoked and allowed for affection and brotherly love.

'And it had been sounded in Paroah's palace saying: "Yosef's brothers arrived!" It greatly pleased Paroah and his servants.' Word spread of the stupendous turn of events surrounding the country's most celebrated personality. The place was abuzz. Wondrously, palace personages, press and plebeians spoke not of Semitic parasites. Their reception was most favorable. Divine Providence's hand played a part in that, too.

Banner Headlines:

FAIRY TALE

Egypt's Viceroy Zaphnat Paneach's Rediscovered Family

The lead story featured the saga. Two factors – Yosef's popularity and the legendary patriarchal reputation hailing from Canaan – explain the tumultuous welcome Yaakov's family received. Presumably, Yosef fastidiously retained the original story line. For public consumption, it depicted a forcible kidnapping and sale to Egyptian slavery. The family had not heard or seen each other in over two decades. Had the locals learned the truth, an outpouring of a different kind would have showered the arriving brothers.

A clean official court version of Yosef's separation brought the intended reaction. The siblings were hailed as dignitaries. 'It greatly pleased Paroah and his servants.' The king gushed. 'And Paroah said to Yosef: "Say to your brothers that they must do this. Load your pack animals. Go and come [back] to the Land of Canaan."' Paroah was adamant that Yosef, with the powers vested in him, demand the family to return as welcomed guests. He insisted that his father's entire family come. Warmly addressing Yosef's brothers, 'Egypt's finest land I give to you. You shall eat of the fat of the land.'

Fourth *aliyah*

'And you are instructed to do this: Take from the land Egyptian chariots for your children and wives, transporting your father with them. Come!'

Paroah's generous words translated into a bona fide government-backed proposition. David in *Tehillim*[21] writes "He [Hashem] makes war cease…He burns (armies') *chariots* in fire." Dispatching royal carriages – the equivalent of modern-day top brass stretch limos – meant sending an ambassadorial motorcade to fetch Yaakov with military parade pomp. Chauffeured in high-stepping, four horse-powered style – that is how the patriarch made his way to Egypt, a regal relocation. 'Yosef provided them with chariots granted license by Paroah' – releasing military equipment for civilian use would have otherwise been impossible. As we will see before this *aliyah*'s conclusion, Yaakov acknowledged the veracity of his sons' statement that Yosef still lives when he saw Egyptian-drawn coaches. Tank Force One was the genuine article.

Paroah seemingly repeated a directive calling for Yaakov. Why? Two distinct offers were extended. First, the king promised the unlimited usage of Goshen for the entire extended family and second, he wanted to indulge Yaakov, an old man, with easier traveling accommodations. Curiosity to meet his right-hand man's illustrious father also played a part in Paroah's grace. From where did his crack viceroy's lineage derive?

Truly, Paroah had not the slightest interest making money off of Yaakov's clan. 'And do not pay attention to your goods for the Land of Egypt's very best is for you.' He planned on enriching them. 'And *Bnei* Yisrael did as they were told. Yosef provided them with chariots granted license by Paroah and gave them travel provisions.' Godspeed was the main thing. And since the king assuaged their concerns about leaving their heavy valises back in Egypt, traveling lightly would enable a sprightly pace. Their provisions included only gifts, food, and the provender necessary to make the round trip.

Among those presents Yosef showered upon the brothers, 'he gave every man a change of clothing. And he gave Binyamin three hundred talents of silver and five suits.' Not shockingly, even in ancient times, the popular adage held true: the clothing makes the man. Yosef outfitted his brothers in the finest so as to lend them aristocratic *élan*. An elegant touch had also been

21. 46:10

intended to gladden Yaakov. Each brother in turn took his tranche and left Yosef. Binyamin was saved for last. Five suits allowed him to don fresh wears daily as befit the viceroy's constant companion.[22]

'And for his father he gave the same, as well as ten laden donkeys from Egypt's choicest and ten she-asses bearing provender, grain and food for his father's trip.' Yosef's munificence for Yaakov began where it left off for Binyamin. Namely, added to the same silver and clothing were unimaginable goodies carried by twenty beasts of burden. Since time was of the essence, Yosef included ample provisions for the brothers' road trip to avoid unnecessary stops.

'And he sent his brothers off and they went.' Parting after what seemed like a lifetime of separation did not, naturally, transpire with ease. The brothers could not pull themselves apart until Yosef's gumption moved them out. Given the magnitude of transport, packing and moving Yaakov's family, dallying simply was not in the offing. Plausibly, he also accompanied them out of the city. Yosef, a perfect *mentsch*, was not going to put on aristocratic airs.

'And he said to them: "Do not encounter hardship."' Yosef's blessing of bon voyage prayed for their safe passage and success. As Jews engaged in *mitzvot*, he hoped they would not be harmed[23] and quickly fulfill their tasks with great ease.

'And they came out from Egypt and arrived to the Land of Canaan to Yaakov their father.' Prioritizing, the brothers' main desire was not to go to their respective homes but rather they longed to share the earth-shattering news with their father. A huge boulder would lift from their consciences as they offset the message they bore twenty-two years earlier of Yosef's mauling, and death.

The Torah records Yaakov's reaction to hearing about discovering Yosef in Egypt. 'And they told him saying: "Yosef is alive. He is ruler over the entire Land of Egypt." His heart cringed because he did not believe them.' Akin to post traumatic stress disorder, the patriarch felt faint at the slightest hint or innuendo of anything that smacked of his son. To cope, Yaakov had become insulated and hardened. In short – his guard remained high, optimism low. Twenty-two long years of despair created convoluted chains

22. Cf. *Ritva* and *Meiri* to BT *Makkot* 11b who opine that Binyamin stayed behind in Egypt with Yosef.

23. Cf. BT *Pesachim* 8b

strangling his heart. Bereavement had embedded too deep to even consider… to even consider.

His cruel ears were playing tricks on an old man – what was his sons' enthusiasm and vivaciousness? Hearing of Yosef's survival coupled with utter incredulity triggered a coping mechanism's collapse. Over two decades of yearning welled up at once, as if the patriarch's most beloved son had just died that morning. Dizzied, Yaakov reeled. Billowing brown shadows blackened. Slumping, the patriarch was about to pass out. All too often, the family had seen the patriarch's wan look before.

Grappling how to shake Yaakov out of the funk, the brothers continued talking – their turn to administer crisis intervention. 'And they told him all of Yosef's words that he had spoken to them. And he saw the chariots that Yosef dispatched to bring him. Their father Yaakov's spirit was resuscitated.' Details, particulars, conversation, signs, hearing, seeing, descriptions – a glimmer of hope arose in Yaakov's mind.

And then he was coaxed to peek outside. What a royal sight – Egyptian chariots! His tears welled. Indescribable joy tickled Yaakov's stone soul.

The brothers focused on two points. One, Yosef was still alive, and two, he ruled Egypt. The Torah does not elaborate on the brothers' stories of Yosef's accomplishments or what they experienced, but it is certain that they praised his acumen as well as his high position in the land. Their mission's success depended on following Yosef's instructions, and they did. Sibling envy was a thing of the past.

Fifth *aliyah*

'And Yisrael said: "It is enough that my son Yosef is alive. I will go down and see him before I die."'

Yaakov heard about Yosef's success and comfort. It did not budge him. He heard about the dire forecasts and promises to have his son's support. It did not interest him. One thing did matter. Setting eyes on his son literally meant the world to him. 'I will go and see him before I die.'

In Yaakov's mind, it would be a short jaunt and then he would return home to Canaan. Enthusiastically and quickly, Yaakov's entire family, all wanting to join Yaakov in meeting their regal relative, packed up and joined him for this historic reunion. 'Yisrael and those accompanying him traveled

and came to Beer Sheva. He sacrificed sacrifices to his father Yitzchak's Almighty One.' For two reasons it was a natural stopover. One, Beer Sheva had close associations with the first two patriarchs. Fervent forefather prayer and devotion hallowed the spot. Also, the place was dear to Yaakov because that had been his departure point to Lavan in Padan Aram. Beer Sheva had been the initial step on a road to the security promises contained in the ladder dream/prophecy.

In Beer Sheva, 'he sacrificed sacrifices to his father Yitzchak's Almighty One.' Why did the Torah conspicuously omit mention of Avraham? Yaakov's mindset and dilemma provide the explanation. On the one hand, Yaakov pined for Yosef. On the other, he had a deep-seated fear of leaving the Holy Land – even for a brief spell. Egyptian libertine life and degenerate values presented impediments on a man of faith. A debate raged in Yaakov's mind and thus sought ancestral precedent. True, Avraham sojourned there in drought times. But that was before Hashem's covenant with his descendants was sealed with circumcision and the *akedah*. Hashem's Providence, then, had played a smaller part in his religious makeup and life. In contrast, Hashem intervened and warned Yitzchak against seeking relief in Egypt.

Yaakov was torn now as he had been when he considered taking flight to Charan. Seemingly, his personal preference conflicted with his role-model, patriarchal position. On that first occasion, he received assurance via Divine communiqué. 'I [Hashem] am with you. I will protect you wherever you go and bring you back to this land.'[24] As a result of those heavenly guarantees, Yaakov had then pledged vows of devoted service within Israel's borders. His present prayer to his father *Yitzchak*'s Almighty One recalled Hashem's specific warning to Yitzchak not to travel to Egypt. In other words, Yaakov alluded to Yitzchak's precedent, petitioning a waiver. That is, Hashem's strict earlier ruling to his father aside, Yaakov begged for a temporary pass. Divine permission was granted. 'I am your father's Almighty.' As if to say, that despite being the Holy One of Yitzchak Who generally frowns on leaving Israel, Hashem granted him the freedom to go. 'Do not fear traveling to Egypt.'

The assurance carried several layers of Divine Promise – each assuaging Yaakov's existential concerns. The patriarch dwelled on four disturbing

24. Chapter seven, first *aliyah*

physical and religious Egyptian threats presented to the tiny, pious enclave. Hashem alleviated them all:

- Would Egypt massacre his family? 'I am Hashem, your father's Almighty. Do not fear traveling to Egypt for I will make them wax prolific there.' Besides the promises of protection, Yaakov was apprised that they would not return after seeing Yosef as planned. A long sojourn would, at the end of the day, number a formidably-sized people. Finally note that Hashem refrained from commanding Yaakov to travel to Egypt. The Almighty focused on alleviating his fears.
- Would its milieu, entrenched in occult and pagan practice derail him from close Divine Supervision and prophetic experience? 'I will descend with you to Egypt.' Divine Providence would not abandon him due to Egypt's foreign and queer milieu, soaked in black magic. It is once again underscored that Hashem merely undertook to accompany Yaakov to Egypt but did not insist, let alone command, his going there.
- Would he die and be buried outside of Chevron's *me'arat haMachpelah*? 'And I will certainly bring you back up.' The patriarchal prophecy noted that Hashem will enable his burial in Chevron alongside Yaakov's illustrious father and grandfather.
- Might Yosef predecease him, turning his joy to grief? 'And Yosef will place his hand over your eyes.' This referred to Yosef's act of closing Yaakov's eyes after he passes. There would be no unnatural reverses of child/parental bereavement. The phrase may also mean that Yosef alone would support Yaakov. There would be no need to solicit funds from outside the family.

While these comforting words intended to calm Yaakov's personal or limited scope of disquiet, there is another fitting interpretation. Throughout *Tanach* the Jewish Nation are frequently collectively referred to as Yaakov. Assuming that here, perhaps the Torah is generalizing. The multi-leveled guarantees boded favorably for all *Bnei* Yisrael throughout their lingering, perilous Egyptian exile.

'Do not fear traveling to Egypt… I will descend with you to Egypt…and I will bring you back up, and raise My own stature.' The national aspect of these verses are worthy of special mention. Homiletically, the Torah posits that Hashem's Providence is inextricably intertwined with that of Yaakov and

Bnei Yisrael. Read that Hashem's especial protection accompanied Yaakov's children in Egypt. *Sefer Tehillim*[25] is explicit: 'I will be with him [when he is] in trouble.' The Sages[26] echoed those sentiments. Hashem accompanied the Jews throughout their Egyptian exile.

The interconnectedness between the Creator and the Jews is a significant, omnipresent *Tanach* thread and theme. They are, to be colloquial, fellow travelers. Anthropomorphisms are, of course, figurative and highlight that eternal bond. The mystical *Shechinah* descending to Egypt should not be a source of belittlement toward the Ineffable One on account of His association with a Jewish Nation consisting of limited and finite mortals. Far from representing theological difficulties, Hashem's link with His holy people should aid in viewing Hashem as the Living Almighty force in the world. These verses mark the first time Hashem's eminence, so to speak, gets metaphorically measured in terms of Jewish status. For example, when Jews act appropriately by following patriarchal ways, they garner respect and success, and thus Hashem's stature is accordingly elevated. Awareness of His existence and omnipotence is heightened. The opposite determinant also holds true. Thus, the perception of Hashem is downgraded during Jewish trying times, and elevated upon their extrication. Of course, Hashem's true essence and nature are immovable and independent. The full brunt of Hashem's association (for didactic purposes and homiletics) with *Bnei* Yisrael will take on momentous meaning throughout *Sefer Shmot*.[27] Mount Sinai's revelation eternally changed and enshrined Hashem's Relationship vis-à-vis the world.

Following this line of interpretation, Yaakov likely redoubled his commitment to leave Egypt as soon as feasible in light of the dire national ramifications should he remain. Hashem informed him that resistance was essentially futile. 'Yosef will place his hand over your eyes.' Yaakov would be so enthralled to reconnect with his beloved son that he would lose sight of the bigger picture. The patriarch's bringing all his sons to Egypt, exhaling his last breath in that land, effectively sealed exile's decree.

'And Yaakov arose from Beer Sheva. And *Bnei* Yisrael brought Yaakov their father and their children and their wives in the chariots that Paroah dispatched to carry them.' Secure with his vision's Divine promises, Yaakov

25. 91:15
26. BT *Megillah* 29a
27. See e.g. *Shmot* 18:11

continued his journey. A census produced a record of the number of Jewish souls. 'His sons and sons' sons with him, his daughters and sons' daughters – all of his seed – he brought with him to Egypt.' The ensuing verses list all seventy names in elaborate testimony to Hashem's kindnesses. That modest figure spawned and mushroomed into an adult male population of sixty myriads (600,000) two hundred and ten years later.[28] How was the number seventy arrived at? The total of Yaakov's descendants who accompanied him to Yosef in Egypt equaled sixty-six. Add to that Yosef and his two sons (66+3=69) who were already in Egypt together with the patriarch Yaakov (69+1=70). 'All the people belonging to Yaakov's household who came to Egypt (totaled) seventy.'

Sixth *aliyah*

'And he sent Yehudah ahead to Yosef in order to instruct him to come to Goshen, since they had come to the Land of Goshen.'

Recall that Yosef, on his own initiative, considered Goshen an ideal location for the family and offered it before consulting the relevant authorities. Logically, that spot was where Yaakov and his family drove to and set up camp awaiting Yosef's further instructions. Because of the region's considerable size, it made sense to have someone provide Yosef with the exact location to facilitate the reunion. Point man Yehudah was chosen, informing his brother where the family encamped.

'And Yosef harnessed his chariot and went to greet Yisrael his father in Goshen. And he saw him and embraced him. And he cried, embracing him more.' Hitching his own chariot suggests Yosef's unbridled excitement. Donning typical military insignias, regalia replete with helmet, Yosef rode up and approached them. Only after removing his head gear did his father see him. 'And he (Yaakov) saw him, embracing him. And he embraced him more.' Unabated tears of joy streamed, crying even more than when Yaakov believed that he had lost Yosef forever. 'And Yisrael said to Yosef: "Now I can die after I have seen your face, because you are still alive."' His sentiments

28. The precise duration of the Egyptian exile is a matter of discussion due to contradictory verses on the matter. For a full discussion see Abravanel to *Shmot* 12:21 and *Yechezkel* Perek 4.

conveyed beatitude purely due to having seen his son given up for dead. His royal accoutrement made no particular impression on the hoary patriarch.

Soon afterwards Yosef explained why he could not stay longer, attributing it to proper protocol. 'And Yosef told his brothers and his father's household: "I will arise and tell Paroah. I will say to him that my brothers and father's household hailing from Canaan have come to me. And the men, being shepherds, long-standing cattlemen, have brought their flocks, cattle and everything they own."' Had Paroah heard of the family's arrival from another source, the gaffe would be awkward and inexcusably amateurish. Note that Yosef did not relay the protocol concerns to his father for obvious reasons. Yaakov did not need to be apprised of Goshen being currently unapproved by Paroah. Yosef spoke self-assuredly to his brothers but caution dictated that he alert them. Confidently, he fully expected an easy time maneuvering Paroah so that Goshen would appear as the king's and not Yosef's initiative.

Distancing the family from the capital city was paramount to Yosef who cringed to think about other members joining government service. Inevitably, politics and intrigue corrupt. By contrast, shepherding offers solitude.

Yosef stated that he would speak to Paroah first regarding his brothers' occupation, hoping to garner Goshen at that early stage. Failing that, he predicted his brothers meeting with Paroah. That initial, pivotal meeting had been meticulously planned and rehearsed at Yosef's instruction. Knowing Paroah intimately, he anticipated the tenor of the talks and drilled his family. 'And if Paroah calls you and asks your trade, say to him: "Your servants are cattlemen from our youth until the present day, we and our forefathers as well." So that you will dwell in the Land of Goshen since Egyptians consider all manner of shepherding [to be] abominable.' A consummate strategist and thinker, Yosef preferred staying behind the scenes when it came to his family's Egyptian sojourn. It was far preferable for the king to discover the family's background and suggest Goshen as an appropriate venue.

The viceroy enjoined his brothers to exude assertiveness. Any trace of self-deprecation or waffling would embolden Paroah to rope them into an occupation of his choosing. They were to say that they were "cattlemen." Livestock proprietors not hired hands. That was the only occupation they had ever known.

It is possible that the Egyptians held cattlemen in esteem, rather than abominable, as worthy demigods.[29] Paroah would likely grant them the honor of dwelling in flock-friendly Goshen.

'And Yosef came and told Paroah saying: "My father and brothers, their flocks and their cattle and all they possess have come from the Land of Canaan. Presently they are in Goshen."' Yosef skated on thin ice. Note how he announced to Paroah in a general sense that his family came from Canaan, whereas he had previously told his brothers that he would say that they had come 'to him.' That kind of phrasing would be a major mistake. Paroah had no use for welfare cases, and Yosef had better rethink his plans to have government funds support Yaakov's family. Underscoring their material possessions was also meant to dispel Pharaoh's dislike of burgeoning public expenses.

Lukewarm was the atmosphere surrounding that meeting. At best Paroah remained noncommittal about the Hebrews getting Goshen. When Paroah remained indifferent, Yosef took a different tack. 'And he took the more aristocratic of his brothers – five men – and presented them to Paroah. And Paroah said to his brothers: "What is it that you do?" And they responded to Paroah: "Your servants are shepherds, we and also our forefathers."' Necessity was the mother of veering off Yosef's text. It was unthinkable to be lassoed into the king's court, and hence living in Goshen ranked vital. They came straight out with it: they were not cattlemen, they were shepherds. From time immemorial. (So your Highness, please grant us pasturelands…)

Their answer was curt because the brothers assumed that that would be the end of the discussions and Goshen would be theirs. Paroah's silence gave them pause and so they interjected, getting right to the point. Limiting the time they intended to remain in Egypt smoothed matters. 'And they said to Paroah: "We came to the land (temporarily) because our flocks do not have pasture on account of Canaan's severe famine. And thus please (allow) your servants to dwell in the Land of Goshen."' Pegging an exit date, the brothers explained that hopefully Canaan's famine would run its course in a year or maybe two. After that they fully intended to return home. Noticeably, Paroah warmed up and felt better about the *nouveau émigré*.

At this juncture, Paroah revealed his shrewdness. The king did not accept Yosef's or the brother's words at face value. To him it was obvious that

29. תועבת מצרים bears both interpretations.

the family came to sponge off the viceroy's *protekzia*. All but dismissing the visitors, the king's words addressed Yosef. 'And Paroah said to Yosef saying: "Your father and brothers have come to you."' Goshen's pasturelands, Paroah presumed, were merely a window-dressing. In Paroah's eyes, the main story had to do with a family hoping to capitalize on Yosef's connections. As such Paroah, in so many words, told Yosef that he was not inclined to be part of this arrangement though he did not slam the doors shut. 'The Land of Egypt lies before you. Place your father and brothers in the choice land and they will dwell in the Land of Goshen.' Note that Paroah was not adverse to Yosef's plan. He simply did not want a part in it. The king meant that Yosef had amassed sufficient power to favor whomever he desired.

Fluent in palace innuendo and diplomatic doublespeak, Yosef hesitated to pull rank and make any move whose paper trail led back to him. Paroah did eventually give in after hitting upon the right phraseology. 'They will dwell in the Land of Goshen.' A royal decree sealed the deal with, naturally, a caveat. Paroah instructed Yosef 'If you know of able, mighty men among them, place them in charge of my flocks.' Parenthetically, the Torah seems to be teaching that the Egyptians did not find shepherding abominable. Had that been the case, why did Paroah possess royal herds? Rather the reader deduces that the profession was held in high regard, in line with the interpretation offered earlier in this *aliyah*.

A king's job is not only haggling and horse-trading. On occasion a palace enjoys, if you will, perks. 'And Yosef brought his father Yaakov.' An audience was granted with His Highness. 'And he stood before Paroah and Yaakov blessed Paroah.' Astounded at the patriarch's advanced age, he exclaimed. 'And Paroah said to Yaakov: "How old you are!"' Less indecorous than flabbergasted, the king was genuinely curious about Yaakov's longevity. The patriarch explained that tufts of hoary, white hairs are not always a function of old age; calamity and stress grey a man.

'And Yaakov said to Paroah: "The years of my life's journey span one hundred and thirty years."' He related some of his wanderings, penciling his folio in chilled charcoal. 'Scant and foul have my life's years been, not achieving [the pleasantness of] my father's and grandfather's lives, although they too sojourned.' Like bookends, cordial blessings and greetings commenced and concluded Yaakov and Paroah's visit.

Seventh *aliyah*

'And Yosef settled his father and brothers, giving them holdings in the Land of Egypt – the choicest part of the land, in Ramses region, as Paroah had commanded.'

Per Paroah's instruction, Yosef provided for his family's needs. 'And Yosef supported his father, his brothers and father's household (with) bread down to the youngest child.' Despite the famine's rigors, he sustained them generously. 'And food was not (to be found) in the entire land…and the Land of Egypt and Land of Canaan languished because of the famine.'

Two men of distinction, Yosef and Daniyel, have many overlaps. In one way, though, they differed. After gaining ascendancy in Nevuchadnetzar's court, Daniyel called upon the king to employ his Jewish confreres.[30] Not so with Yosef. Shepherding was a very dignified profession and there was no need to tamper with the family's familiar breadwinning methods. Another concern was courtier competition. The brothers could never hope to achieve Yosef's position. If a multi-colored coat could beget murderous mischief, then a viceroy's prestige could certainly engender enmity.

'And Yosef gathered all of the money circulating in the Land of Egypt and the Land of Canaan due to the grain sales that they sold. And Yosef brought in all of the currency to Paroah's household.' Plausibly, this time of exponentially growing state coffers occurred during the famine's first two years. That time period coincided with Yosef's confrontation with his brothers. At the end of that time, foreign merchants steadily decreased their buying. The ensuing five years, according to Yosef's predictions, were slated to witness zero agricultural activities such as plowing and harvesting. Desperation stalked the cities.

Paroah's grain inventory had remained after other granaries had none. Local money ran dry, but the king's hand was flush. 'And all Egyptians came to Yosef saying: "Give us bread! Why should we perish in your presence for want of money?" And Yosef said: "Bring me your cattle and I will barter with you [food in exchange] for your cattle if funds are gone."' Lowing, bleating, braying and neighing filled the royal stables. Around the rest of the countryside, things must have been eerily silent. Thus Year One of the remaining five years ended.

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30. *Daniyel* 2:49

Year Two commenced. With no blight letup in sight, the Egyptians' plight grew more severe, their liquid assets exhausted. This meant that after their cash and chattel had been spent, the public clamor countered with new ideas to curtail their hunger. 'And at that year's conclusion and they came to him in the second year and they said to him: "We will not hide from my master that although money, and livestock and animals have gone to my master, we still have our bodies' (labor) and our land for my master to take."' The Egyptians remised and released their landed interests, serving as fiefs in exchange for bread. The locals, it seems, were content to sell their backs and property in order to reap sustenance and keep their fields from total disuse. 'And Yosef purchased all of Egypt's land for Paroah because each man had sold his field due to the reeling famine effects. And the land was Paroah's.' Hence the king acquired his subjects' property. As a consequence of this landlessness, a new government policy took root: Forced Population Transfers. These extreme measures alleviated starvation while simultaneously greatly enhancing government production. As centralized government planning dispossessed people, an efficient working class proletariat concentrated on the tasks assigned to them.

After having realized Paroah's wildest dreams, Yosef took aim at solving the masses' misery. Although by right he could have worked them to the bone and provided them with nothing more than daily dry pita, unilaterally he offered greater labor rights. 'Take seed for yourselves and plant the land. And (out of the) produce's yield, give one fifth to Paroah and keep four fifths for yourselves to (subsequently) seed the fields and for your food, for your households and for your children.' That is, in addition to selling Egyptians grain, Yosef provided farm relief in the form of heavily government-subsidized seeds.

The bottom line: new labor incentives translated into an effective lower, twenty percent marginal tax rate. Considering that customary tithing is ten percent, the viceroy's evenhanded reforms won him wide acclaim, a magnificent and magnanimous win-win government economic stimulus package. 'And they said: "You have saved us. We have found grace in our master's eyes. And we will be slaves to Paroah."' Although Yosef's policy allowed them to feel like free men, they acknowledged their undying allegiance to Paroah in recognition of Yosef's largesse. They were his slaves. Thus Year Two ended.

As things turned out, Paroah's prophetic dream predicting seven years of famine got commuted after four years – a three-year reprieve likely due

to pious Yaakov's arrival in Egypt. The Nile River resumed irrigating the adjacent fields.

In conclusion, the Torah desired to impart four lessons from the *parashah's* final passage concerning Yosef's brilliant administrative handling of the crisis:

- *Hashem's Benevolence* As the verse teaches 'Hashem's eyes are upon those who fear Him.'[31] Apropos, while famine struck deep into the hearts of the hapless Egyptians forced to sell their belongings, Yaakov and his family could shrug off the famine. Gratis.
- *Providence* Despite the fact that Yosef supported his entire family while citizens wallowed in misery, he was never besmirched in *The Goshen Gazette* editorials. Yaakov's family enjoyed material comfort yet the unconscionable locals never protested nor displayed jealousy over their preferential treatment.
- *Commiseration* Yosef's forced population transfer policy resulted in the general displacement of untold numbers of Egyptians dispersed and disgorged from their home and familiar surroundings. This buffered *Bnei* Yisrael's refugee plight.
- *Tithes* Yosef established a tithing system for the Egyptian priestly caste. They became Paroah's wards and received sustenance. Later when the Torah commanded tithes for the Levites[32] and indigent,[33] the de facto *tzedakah* met no resistance as an incipient Jewish Nation had been raised with a similar taxation.

31. *Tehillim* 33:18–19
32. *Bamidbar* 18:24
33. *Devarim* 14:28

CHAPTER TWELVE

PARASHAT VAYCHI

PROMISE

First *aliyah*

'And Yaakov lived in the Land of Egypt for seventeen years. And Yaakov's life's years [were] one hundred and forty seven.'

Yaakov's initial desire to see Yosef in the context of a short overall Egyptian sojourn before returning to Canaan did not materialize. The prophecy in Beer Sheva had foretold a very different reality. Hashem did not give Yaakov a specific time frame, however the Divine promise was unequivocal: 'And I [Hashem] will certainly bring you back up.'[1] The concluding verse in *Vayigash* unfurled the fulfillment of Hashem's plan – 'And Israel dwelled in the Land of Egypt, entrenched in the Land of Goshen. And they grew and multiplied there exceedingly.'

'And Yaakov lived in the Land of Egypt for seventeen years.' Yaakov's failure to return to Canaan was not due to his sudden demise. The patriarch, we will see, passed away seventeen years after his arrival. His progeny tacked on additional centuries along the Nile's bank. 'And Yisrael's days approached their end and he called his son Yosef saying to him: "If I have found favor in your eyes, place your hand [as a solemn oath] under my thigh and perform for me a loving kindness and truth. Do not bury me in Egypt."' Significantly, the verse does not say that Yaakov ailed. That would come later. It does say that the forefather felt death approaching. In modern parlance, Yaakov beckoned Yosef to hear instructions akin to a living will. Waiting too long to issue crucial directives is not a good idea; wills are best drafted when one is thinking clearly and unhurriedly. Reasonable health and presence of mind are, to be sure the main thing.

1. Chapter eleven, fifth *aliyah*

Yaakov summoned Yosef, appointing him executor. While Rashi[2] stresses the choice of Yosef as due to practical considerations (read: clout), the Sages[3] emphasize that Yaakov wanted him to take responsibility for returning his remains to Canaan since Yosef directed Yaakov's descent to Egypt in the first place. There is a third possibility. Prophetically, his intuition intimated that Yosef's sarcophagus would not be carried and buried in Israel until the returning Jews brought it.[4] Yaakov feared Yosef would consent to the patriarch's interment in Egypt as a guarantor for bringing them both back up to Canaan. His burial, he demanded, should take place in Israel immediately after his death. Yosef was, so to speak, going to have to make it back on his own.

Yosef's placement of his hand under his father's thigh indicated an oath taken by the solemn sanctity of *brit milah*[5] or a hint that Yosef would carry his father's body back to *Eretz* Yisrael. The burial request directed at Yosef highlighted his dual capacity: Son and Second Commander. A viceroy's act with a country's subject is a loving kindness; a son's fulfillment of filial obligations is an act of truth.

'Do not bury me now in Egypt.' The patriarch found even temporary interment in Mitzrayim disconcerting and unacceptable. 'When I rest with my forefathers you will carry me from Egypt and bury me in their burial plots. And he said: "I will do as you say."' Beautifully, the Sages[6] taught that Yosef was moved by his father's determination to be buried in the Holy Land. He pledged to conduct himself similarly when the time came. A general discussion regarding interment can be found in *Parashat Chayei Sarah.*[7] Here specific motives are emphasized. Later in this *parashah*[8] we will better understand what was on Yosef's mind.

Yosef knew his powers and his limitations, thus committing to the extent that Paroah permitted. It was not good enough. Yaakov did not want Paroah's interference – not to mention veto. Oaths bind inviolably. 'And he said: "Swear

2. 47:29 s.v. ויקרא
3. See *Torah Sheleimah* 94
4. *Shmot* 13:19
5. See chapter five, second *aliyah*
6. See *Torah Sheleimah* 128
7. Chapter five, second *aliyah*
8. Seventh *aliyah* below

to me." And he swore to him. And Yisrael prostrated himself at the head of the bed.' The king would later bid Yosef: 'Bury your father as he made you swear.'[9]

'And it was after these things it was told [to] Yosef: "Behold, your father is ill." And he brought his two sons with him – Menasheh and Efraim.' Given his father's advanced age and illness as well as fearing his imminent death, Yosef hastened his arrival. The Sages[10] further underscored the dire predilections of disease and fatality in Biblical times when they wrote that until King Chizkiyah, men did not recover from illnesses. Naturally, obtaining the patriarchal blessing before passing assumed the very highest priority for Yosef. The following are the final forefather's concluding words on earth – his prescient blessings and instructions. Yaakov first blessed Yosef's sons before convening his twelve sons. Death would soon visit the ancient prophet, flanked by his loved ones. At long last, peace came to Yaakov; a sweet, most brief Divine kiss.

An announcement preceded Yosef's arrival. 'Mustering strength, Yisrael sat up in his bed. And Yaakov said to Yosef: "Hashem Almighty appeared to me in Luz of Canaan and He blessed me. And He said to me: 'Behold I will multiply and increase you and establish you for a multitudinous nationhood. I bestow this land for your seed after you as an everlasting legacy.' And now your two sons born to you in the Land of Egypt prior to my arrival in Egypt are mine. Efraim and Menasheh are equal to Reuven and Shimon – they are mine."'

Yaakov fully intended to rearrange his sons' natural birth order by extending to Yosef the firstborn rights and privileges due to Reuven. Yosef might have suspected his father's propriety and sense of rectitude. Yaakov therefore provided backing for the seeming unorthodox initiative by invoking the Divine promise acquired over half a century earlier. Returning from Lavan's household, the third forefather heard a pronouncement. There could be no mistaking Luz's message and import. 'He [Hashem] blessed *me*.' Yaakov grasped those words literally. That is, the blessing of additional sons had been promised to him. It was not a vague gesture regarding Yaakov's distant descendants.

The patriarch derived the triple-tiered blessings from a close scrutiny of the prophecy. Since it ended with a promise explicitly relating to Yaakov's seed, it followed that the opening phrase was of a personal nature. That segment's *prima facie* verbosity hinted at three additional sons. 'I will *multiply*

9. Sixth *aliyah* below
10. *Bereshit Rabbah* 65:9 (cf. BT *Bava* Metzia 87a)

and *increase* you and establish you for a *multitudinous nationhood*.' Since only Binyamin was born after the heavenly communication, there remained a lacuna. The reunion with Yosef and meeting his two sons produced a radiant illumination. A crack was plugged.

That was not all. Yaakov reveled at Yosef's younger son's name since it indicated the Divine approval of that grandson as an additional tribe. Efraim's name dovetailed perfectly with the verse's first verb because *multiply* shares the predicate's consonants.[11] *Increase* covers Menasheh. Yaakov understood the coda: Efraim and Menasheh are like Reuven and Shimon.

Legitimately, it may be asked why Efraim's name is ensconced within Yaakov's prophecy but not Menasheh's? One surmises that Menasheh, by virtue of being Yosef's firstborn, would simply be Yosef's heir, and would not add to the total of the twelve tribes in any event. Finally, the *multitudinous nationhood* is Binyamin. Yosef learned that any additional children he might father would not be counted in Yaakov's matrix.

When the numbers were settled and adjustments made to reconfigure Yaakov's encampment, things looked like this. Menasheh and Efraim's tribes traveled in the desert under their respective banners[12]; both tribal chiefs separately participated in the altar's dedication[13]; and land got parceled to each one independently.[14] Other miscellany highlighted the fact that Yosef's two sons achieved parity with their father's siblings. Yaakov's benediction also contributed to the two tribes' successes and propagation. Interestingly, the second *Bamidbar* census revealed that Menasheh[15] and Efraim[16] had outpopulated Reuven[17] and Shimon[18] respectively. 'And those born to you after them are [considered] yours.' Yaakov clarified that his successive sons (should there be) would have the status of patriarchal grandchildren and would be subsumed under their brothers' banners.

Yosef's family promotion had another aspect. His own grandchildren and even great-grandchildren were considered sub-divisional clan leaders, a

11. אפרים - מפרך
12. *Bamidbar* 2:18–21
13. Ibid. 7:48–59
14. *Yehoshua* 16 et al
15. 52,700 (*Bamidbar* 26:34)
16. 32,500 (ibid. 37)
17. 43,730 (ibid. 7)
18. 22,200 (ibid. 14)

rank otherwise assumed only by Yaakov's grandchildren who had accompanied their *sabba* from Canaan.[19] Perhaps this explains the Torah later noting Yosef enjoying his great-grandchildren's company.[20]

Yaakov continued explaining the preferential treatment. 'And when I came from Padan, Rachel passed away in the Land of Canaan on the main highway while a stretch of land remained to reach Efrata. And I buried her there on the Efrat/Beit Lechem highway.' The helter-skelter burial of Yaakov's beloved was revisited. Rachel, by right, should have been buried next to Leah in Chevron. As Yaakov thought more about his wife's untimely death and burial venue on the Efrat road, he connected another mysterious occurrence. In the tribal count, Menasheh stood in for Yosef. Efraim was, so to speak, a bonus. Perhaps, Yaakov reasoned, his grandson deserves full-fledged sibling status as an appeasement to his late grandmother Rachel's burial. *Efrat... Efraim*. Do those two names not sound nearly identical? The forefather thus plumbed a second rationale for including Efraim in the tribal count.

Yaakov's gift to Yosef accomplished three things:

- The Jewish Nation standing on twelve pillars is reflected by the twelve zodiac signs.[21] Yaakov's prophetic intuition understood that in the future, Levi would be taken out of the twelve-tribe mix due to his unique *mikdash* service. Yosef's newly acquired primogeniture granted him a double portion[22] and kept the cosmic number twelve intact.
- The patriarch's present played a part in Menasheh and Efraim's fantastic prolificacy.
- Yosef garnered additional territory in Israel since land allocation was not by head count alone (in which case a split into two tribes would make no difference). Apportionment was done by carving the country into twelve districts, and each tribe picked lots to determine its own province.[23] Yosef therefore received tremendous swathes of territory in greater Israel.

19. See *Bamidbar* 26
20. Seventh *aliyah* below
21. See chapter nine, third *aliyah*
22. See *Devarim* 21:17
23. For an additional discussion see *Yehoshua* 14 and Abravanel's mini-essay ad loc.

'And Yisrael saw Yosef's sons and asked: "Who are these?" And Yosef said to his father: "These are my sons that Hashem granted me (providentially) for this reason." And he said: "Please bring them to me and I will bless them."' The ancient patriarch's eyesight had failed. As he spoke to his son regarding things mystical and esoteric, Yaakov barely noticed let alone recognized the two other men in the room. This prompted his query asking their identity. Validating his father's Luz prophecy, Yosef pointed to his two sons – living proof of his father's words.

Second *aliyah*

'And Yisrael's eyesight darkened
because of old age and he could not see.
And he brought them to him
and he kissed them and hugged them.'

Gladdened by his grandchildren's presence, hugs and kisses, Yaakov delighted. 'And Yisrael said to Yosef: "My prayers did not beseech seeing your face. And now the Almighty has shown me your descendants also."' Prayer, the patriarch taught, has rational limits and he thought that uttering words to heaven requesting a reunion with Yosef surpassed those limits.[24]

The time came for the blessing. Yosef sought to enhance his father's comfort. Until that moment the two grandchildren sat on their venerable *sabba*'s lap. Yosef, out of concern for his frail father, took them a step back, affording Yaakov space. Summing up appreciative gestures for the gracious sentiments and gifts, Yosef prostrated himself. As he again presented Menasheh and Efraim, things got sticky. 'And Yosef brought [back] both of them – Efraim to his right which was at Yisrael's left hand and Menasheh to his left at Yisrael's right hand – and he had them approach him.' In contrast to the first encounter where the grandchildren sat on Yaakov's lap, this time they stood at arm's distance.

Yaakov's statement that 'Efraim and Menasheh are equal to Reuven and Shimon' had intentionally listed Yosef's sons in that order, but Yosef had missed his father's intent regarding those sons' potential and destinies. That is why he assumed that their presentation to Yaakov should take chronological birth order

24. See BT *Berachot* 54a

into account. Since the mighty right hand connotes primacy of purpose – as wise Shlomoh taught[25] – Yosef placed his firstborn at Yaakov's right hand.

Heaven desired that Efraim be influenced by the right hands of both Yosef and Yaakov and so nudged Efraim's alignment through Yaakov's crisscrossed arms. 'And Yisrael placed his right hand, setting it on Efraim's head, though he was younger, whereas his left hand was on Menasheh. He confounded his hands since Menasheh was the elder.' Yaakov's hands supposedly acted foolishly, as if ignorantly, when they uprooted and supplanted the birth order.

The patriarch began with a joint blessing for his favored son's boys. 'And he blessed Yosef and said: "The Almighty One before Whom my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak walked, Who is the Almighty One Who cared for me from my inception until this very day – the *malach* who [merely] extricated me from all adversity – He shall bless the young men. They shall be called by my name and the name of my forefathers Avraham and Yitzchak. They should proliferate like fish within the land."'

Conscientiously, Yaakov knew exactly what he was doing. Note how the patriarch's words' thrust and tenor touch upon three fundamental aspects of Jewish blessing. Which man is truly blessed?

PIETY Placing the sincere pursuit of religious ideals as life's top priority.	'The Almighty One before Whom my forefathers – Avraham & Yitzchak – walked'[26]
MATERIAL SUCCESS Financial security relieves a person from distracting excess toil.	'The Almighty One Who guided me from my inception until this very day'[27]
PROTECTION Insulation from life's vagaries and lurking dangers.	'The malach who redeemed me from all evil'

Yaakov stressed that the protection's source should be accurately attributed to Hashem. Understand that Hashem's vessel, the *malach*, did the Creator's

25. *Mishlei* 3:16
26. 'Walk before Me and be righteous' (Chapter three, sixth *aliyah*)
27. (Meaningful words and letters had been carefully chosen by Yaakov: מעודי (from my inception) in gematriya is 130, and הזה (this) is 17. Whether during the 130 years in *Eretz Yisrael*, or the 17 in Egypt, Hashem had supported him throughout.)

bidding. Avraham spoke similarly when he addressed his servant Eliezer: '[Hashem] will send His *malach* before you.'[28] Jewish creed posits that Hashem and not His agents watch over the nation. The *malach*'s role is that of a facilitator and not initiator.

Returning to the blessing's import, Yaakov attached his name to Efraim and Menasheh, elevating them to son status. Thus read Menasheh and Efraim, sons of Yaakov, son of Yitzchak, son of Avraham. The pedigree change formalized and concretized their equality with Reuven, Shimon etc. Since their new identity had lagged a generation, Yaakov intended to counteract that by blessing them with prodigious descendants. 'They should proliferate like fish within the land.' The overflow of blessing, while invoking Avraham and Yitzchak's names, was phrased in such a way that they should not resemble their forefathers in the sense that they were born with reproductive challenges. The analogy to swarming fish was more than apt.

Third *aliyah*

'And Yosef saw that his father placed his right hand on Efraim's head and it vexed him. And he guided his father's hand to remove it from Efraim's head onto Menasheh's head.'

Though initially awkward and uncomfortable with his father's crisscrossed hands, Yosef did not interfere. He assumed that since Yaakov insisted that the right hand go on Efraim's head, it likely meant that, for reasons he could not imagine, the younger brother would receive a far more propitious blessing than his elder sibling. Yosef kept his discordance to himself. But as the blessing emerged and he heard the generic nature of his father's direction, he questioned his judgment, wondering why Yaakov switched hands. Yosef grasped his father's hand and said: 'Father. This is not right. This is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.'

Yosef got rebuffed. 'And his father refused. And he said: "I know my son, I know. He will also become a nation and he will also grow [prominent]. However, his younger brother will be more prominent than him and his seed will be [famous] throughout the world."' The patriarch was sick and frail but

28. Chapter five, second *aliyah*

lucid regarding Heaven's plan. An initial overall blessing suggested the greatness and equality of the two sons, fit to take their rightful place as full-fledged tribes. However, the right hand on Efraim presaged his preeminence. His excellence would surpass his older brother's. The Sages[29] commenting on the words 'I know my son' conveyed that Yaakov had learned about the sibling rivalry that avalanched into Yosef's sale. That is precisely what peeved Yosef. A jilted firstborn would invite jealousy. Who knew where that might lead?

Yaakov did not ignore Yosef's consternation altogether. He proceeded to bestow an individualized blessing upon each recipient. 'And he blessed each of them on that day saying: "Through you Yisrael will bless saying 'May the Almighty make you like Efraim. And like Menasheh.'" Efraim would be the focal point of future Jewish blessing, with Menasheh relegated to associate status. Nonetheless, the prophecy apprised the patriarch that despite the former divisiveness that racked his own family, he could rest assured that such ghoulish outcomes would not befall Yosef's sons. They were a tight team.

'And he placed Efraim before Menasheh.' Commonly, prophets – early and later ones – employ omens or signs to enhance and draw people's attention.[30] Yaakov's hand placement should be viewed as a tangible omen in the same way that prophets would sometimes employ visual enactments to presage and affect future occurrences.[31]

Yosef now received a tribute exclusive of Menasheh and Efraim. 'And Yisrael said to Yosef: "Behold I am dying. Hashem will be with you [all] and return you [all] to the land of your forefathers. And I give you Shechem – over and above your brothers – that I bought from the Emorites with my sword and bow."' Yaakov meant that the field he purchased would serve as Yosef's designated burial site. Recall that he paid one hundred *kesitah* for the property.[32] Strangely, the Torah records that the patriarch 'bought from the Emorites with my sword and bow.' In fact, Yaakov's weapons of war had nothing to do with that purchase. The idea is, then, to provide a contrast. Namely,

29. *Pesikta Zutreta*
30. See *Shmot* 7 and Abravanel ad loc; *Devarim* 13 and Abravanel ad loc; *Shmuel* I 12:16 and Abravanel ad loc; *Yeshayahu* 7:10 and Abravanel ad loc; *Yirmiyahu* 13:11 and Abravanel ad loc; *Hoshea* 1 and Abravanel ad loc.
31. See *Ramban* to *Bereshit* 12:6
32. Chapter eight, fourth *aliyah*

whereas Shimon and Levi took the town by force, subduing it militarily by way of sword and bow, Yaakov paid cash for Shechem. Yaakov's hard work and toil for his livestock are likened to his sons' arsenal in that both brought about the same ends – though in thoroughly different ways.

Indeed, Yaakov's gift to Yosef closed a circle. Just as Avraham purchased land in Chevron for a family burial place so too Yaakov's first purchase in Canaan was for the use of his children as a family plot. The Sages[33] acknowledged and noted the poetic justice. How appropriate that the precise spot where Yosef had been forcibly wrenched out of Israel by callous hands was now promised to him as where he would be laid gingerly to rest. Perceptively, Yosef also received the message that he would initially be interred in Egypt until the time of the national redemption.

Fourth *aliyah*

'And Yaakov called to his sons.
And he said:
"Gather and I will tell you
what will transpire with you at the end of days."'

Concluding his private conversation with Yosef, Menasheh and Efraim, Yisrael convened all his sons to avoid any resentment on their part. Apparently, he sensed some of his sons' apprehension about this final talk. Fearfully, the sons expected their father's tongue lashing diatribe with regard to unfinished family business. They therefore loitered in the outer recesses of the patriarch's room, dreading the confrontation. Yisrael laid irresistible bait by saying that he intended to apprise them of matters esoteric, including their own future destinies. This, of course, relieved them and whetted their interests.

'*Bnei* Yaakov: Gather and heed. Listen to Yisrael, your father.' When they came closer and stood around him, the patriarch gently rebuked them for resisting admonishment and instruction. A father, any father, is worthy of close attention as he delivers his final *mussar*. By all standards and measures

33. BT *Sotah* 13b

Yisrael was an extraordinary man. Had he not prevailed over man and angel?[34] His sons were expected to welcome such exchanges, not shirk them.

Yisrael beckoned his sons to concentrate as prophetic sparks, shrouded in subtleties and abstruse logos, apprised Heaven's secret plans. All twelve sons. How significant that Yaakov's words and blessings did not exclude any one of them. Recall that both Avraham and Yitzchak received Divine instruction, sending some offspring away. Meritoriously in Yaakov's case, this did not occur because each son earned their rightful place.

What subjects would their father broach? The Sages[35] suggested that Yaakov indeed desired, though thwarted by heavenly forces, to impart end of days predictions. A more straightforward explanation of the verse is that it refers to the distant future.

The overarching theme of the patriarch's dissertation was this. Yaakov foresaw his children's prodigious population growth. Given the prospects of a sizeable Jewish Nation, vast masses of people would need proper governance and administration to facilitate and maximize their potential let alone avoid petty, splintering politics. A monarchy would prove indispensable. Yet, which one tribe deserved it most and could withstand that arduous task and pressure? Bickering and sibling rivalry, while a thing of the past due to heroic efforts and reconciliation successes, could not be entirely ignored. A patriarchal prophecy uttered in solemnity's shadow of death offered the best working possibility of smooth compliance. Hence, his final sentiments dedicated itself to an analysis and addressing of a single question: Which tribe, then, had the right stuff?

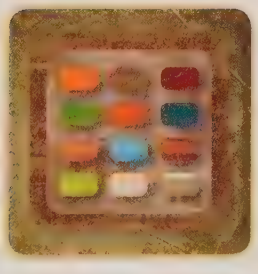
Yisrael, the kingmaker, looked inscrutably into each and every son's attributes and character traits. Tellingly, with some sons the process consisted of vetting or dismissing reviewed past behavior; yet with other sons Yaakov drew freely upon future events. Clearly his final moments weaved and traveled time's grey recesses. Regardless of the past or future, one constant worked without discrepancy. The mystical inspiration scoured the tribes for star personalities.

34. Chapter eight, second *aliyah*
35. *Bereshit Rabbah* 98:2

REUVEN

'**Reuven**, you are my eldest, born when I had my strength and power, [you should have had] advantage of rank and majesty, [but since you are] impetuous like water – you will not have such advantage.' Specifically, Reuven's boyish judgment displayed in the Bilhah affair[36] exposed a fatal flaw. Possibly, Yaakov referred to a future myopic decision by the tribe to remain on the Yarden's East Bank, effectively foregoing their proximity to Israel's heartland and Jerusalem. Moshe echoed similar concerns when he addressed the tribes before passing away.[37]

SHIMON



LEVI

'Brothers **Shimon and Levi**, their wiles are vehicles of avarice.' Next, Yisrael assessed Shimon and Levi together because on many important issues they formed a band and shared similar temperaments. They brooked no compromise in saving Dinah from Shechem's clutches, courageously risking their lives to avenge her and their family honor.[38] But Yaakov saw in them a reckless propensity for adventurism in the way they conducted business; they seemed to revel in shady dealings. 'In their stealth, do not be counted – my soul. In their gathering do not join – my honor. In their fury they [would have] killed a man, but they willfully uprooted a [city] wall.' These harsh words meant that Yaakov censured Shimon and Levi's foray into Shechem. Doubtful of their true intentions, the patriarch noted their violent tendencies because instead of killing Dinah's rapist, they massacred an entire town. Their credibility issues gave Yisrael pause. An honor killing did not warrant rampaging and pillaging Shechem's walled city.

36. Chapter eight, sixth *aliyah*
37. *Devarim* 33:6 – 'May Reuven live and not perish' for those errors.
38. Chapter eight, fifth *aliyah*

The Sages[39] place Yosef's sale at their doorstep, and read this verse 'In their fury they sentenced a man to death and uprooted an ox' as referring to Yosef, to whose efforts abundant grain is attributed (like a plowing ox[40]). 'Cursed be their anger.' Understand that not the men themselves but rather their anger was cursed.

Yaakov may have also alluded to the future when the fugitive Jews wandered the desert. Shimon was the main culprit in Shitim,[41] thereby undoing Bilam's paean to the Jewish People. Renegade Korach, determined to undermine Moshe's unique prophetic status, hailed from Levi.[42] Hence: 'In their fury they [indiscriminately] slew the men [of Shechem] and they willfully uprooted prophecy. Cursed are their potent anger and egregious transgression. I will divide them amongst Yaakov and scatter them amongst Israel.' Yehoshua fulfilled this instruction, marginalizing Shimon within Yehudah's *Eretz* Israel territory.[43] Levi's scattering alludes to his residence in the forty-eight Levite cities distributed throughout greater *Eretz* Yisrael.[44]

A tendency toward greed, lack of refinement, and gruffness are not befitting a king. These two had not developed diplomatic polish let alone engendered ample judicious leanings. In addition, effective regents must work within a consensus starting with a solid home base. Shimon and Levi were, in a sense, homeless.

Note that Yisrael's first three sons' actions did not rule out their descendants being most deserving of kingship. Levi, in particular, was singled out to officiate in the *mikdash*. However, kingship was not within the patriarch's personal discretion and druthers. His hands were very much tied, and tongue very much Heaven's conduit. Had he been able to nominate his choice, Yosef or Binyamin would have been given the nod. Instead, Yaakov delivered a brief sentence to Binyamin and spent quite a bit more on Bilhah's Dan. Clearly, Hashem was writing this script.

The Almighty wanted Yaakov to deliver *mussar* to his eldest trio and instill a proper proportion of Hashem's wrath for inappropriate behavior.

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39. *Aggadat Bereshit* 83
40. See *Mishlei* 14:4
41. *Bamidbar* 25:1–15. See also *Rashi Bamidbar* 26:14
42. *Bamidbar* 16
43. See *Yehoshua* 19:9
44. *Bamidbar* 35:6

Indeed, a disproportionate share of the desert clashes originated with these three oldest tribes. Korach's group was comprised primarily of Leviim and Reuvenites, and Shimon was Shittim's main malefactor.

One might have thought that Yaakov would at least acknowledge Levi being entrusted with *mikdash* work, but since that came about as a result of ignominy (i.e due to the molten calf sin[45]), it was left unsaid. Still, that tribe obviously did merit its esteemed position within the national fabric due to its hard work and dedication. Again, when it came to choosing a king, Yisrael's hands were strapped and his prescient observations had been dictated from Above.

'**Yehudah,** your brothers will concede to you.' Yisrael's analysis probed his fourth son's psyche and found the right traits for monarchal success. Note four outstanding and unusual observations:

- *Consensus* Generally, siblings are far more critical of each other than of strangers. When one member rises to prominence it triggers resentment because siblings tend to equate each other's abilities. This, tellingly, did not happen with Yehudah (as it did with Yosef). He was beloved, appreciated, and acknowledged. Yehuda rallied his family, bringing cohesion.
- *Prowess* 'Your hand shall be on your enemies' neck. Your father's sons will bow to you.' Kings need to wield military might. A general-king garners the respect of his troops. Yehudah fought fearlessly and brilliantly. Pursuing and routing foes were his hallmark. For this ability, all of his siblings prostrated to Yehudah.
- *Judiciousness* Kings have to think and act rationally and methodically. 'Yehudah a young lion cub, you are above preying, my son.' In contrast to his older hot-blooded brothers, Yehudah proceeded slowly. A reluctant warrior, he weighed war in its proper perspective. The verses depict a young cub, full of predatory potential. Yehudah did not delight in violence for violence sake. Plausibly, this verse refers to curbing the brothers from killing Yosef[46] – 'You rose above preying on my son [Yosef]'.

45. *Shmot* 32
46. Chapter nine, third *aliyah*

- *Steadfastness* Again Yaakov alluded to the king of the jungle. 'He crouches, lies down like a lion and lioness. Who dares awaken it?' Confident and mighty, Yehudah would not back down from a warranted war.

The choice was made with the words, 'A staff will not depart from Yehudah, or legislators from his loins.' The verse is tricky but not its message. Rulership, with all of its accoutrements, belongs to this illustrious, deserving tribe. The two crowns embodied in government administration – executive and judicial branches – are his. Perhaps an appropriate rendition of the verse is 'or scribes from between his feet' – royal scribes customarily sat at potentates' feet, writing as dictated.

With Yehudah's prominence etched in prophetic lore, the more elusive issue surrounds the prophecy's duration: 'Until Shiloh will come.' Commentators scramble for help because of the words' ambiguity. Questions abound: When did the blessing/prophecy commence? Why did Moshe or Yehoshua not establish Yehudah's kingship? The first king, Shaul, hailed from Binyamin and was anointed by the venerable Shmuel.[47] In *Sefer Melachim*, Yehudah's kingdom split, and his power dissipated.[48] Furthermore, a post-First Temple historical overview shows that Yehudah played no significant leadership role whatsoever. Defeating the idolatrous and revolting Greek occupiers, the priestly Maccabees led the Jews to victory. During the four centuries that the Second Temple stood there was not one Yehudah leader (save Zerubavel for a brief spell in Ezra *HaSofer*'s period). Indeed, what was Yaakov's promise? A yet broader question begs response. If Yisrael's monarchy was such a marvel, why Shmuel's unequivocal lambast when the Jews requested one?[49]

A close reading reveals that Yisrael intended Yehudah to take the lead and initiative vis-à-vis the other tribes. His traits, as enumerated above, made him fit for national prominence. But the word 'staff' does not narrowly refer to kingship; rather it connotes authority in a general sense. Yisrael suggested and urged the Jewish People to look at Yehudah's tribe for matters relating to the public good because his dependable makeup could forever be counted on.

47. *Shmuel* I 10:1
48. *Melachim* I 11 and ff.
49. *Shmuel* I 8:4–21

Of Yehudah's reliability, examples abound:

- When the brothers sentenced Yosef to death, Yehudah stayed the execution.
- Later, he served as chief spokesman for the brothers when impressing on Yaakov that making a second trip to Egypt without Binyamin was an exercise in futility.
- He personally guaranteed Binyamin's safe return.
- In the confrontation with Yosef, it was Yehudah who acted as Chief Solicitor.
- Yaakov entrusted Yehudah to settle the family in Goshen.
- In the desert wanderings, Yehudah hoisted the vanguard's banner. Nachshon,[50] Calev,[51] and Otniel[52] all hailed from Yehudah.
- That tribe led the nation in the conquest of *Eretz* Yisrael.[53]
- They were the first to receive a province allocation in the Holy Land.[54]
- Shaul counted his soldiers hailing from Yehudah as a distinct regiment.[55] Even when Binyamin's Shaul reigned, Yehudah was Israel's most prominent tribe.

Time and again in *Tanach*, when there was a crunch or critical juncture, the tribes picked Yehudah as their captain. Even when the northern and southern Jewish kingdoms split, there was nonetheless some remnant of Yehudah's sovereignty. In short, Yisrael's choice of Yehudah never wavered.

Counting from the *Tanach* period and continuing well past the Second Temple's destruction, Yehudah has more than proved his mettle and lived up to Yisrael's rock-steady advice. The Judean Exilarchs were the highest ranking Jews in Bavel.[56] Alongside the Maccabees was Yehudah at the *Sanhedrin*'s helm. Significantly, the *Sanhedrin* edifice on the Temple Mount was situated in Yehudah's territory.

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50. *Bamidbar* 2:3,9; 7:12
51. *Bamidbar* 13:6 et al
52. *Yehoshua* 15:17 et al
53. *Shoftim* 1:2
54. *Yehoshua* 15
55. *Shmuel* I 11:8; 15:4
56. See BT *Sanhedrin* 5a

Furthermore, it would be erroneous to believe that the tribe's excellence ceased to be felt after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple. *Beit* David's influence was felt in France, Spain and other European centers. Jewish leaders and representatives in the diaspora almost invariably came from Yehudah[57] since most Jews there were of Judean extraction. The Sages[58] also allude to Yehudah as the progenitor of Torah leadership.

How long will *Sabba* Yaakov's promise hold true? The verse says 'all the way until Shiloh.' Shiloh likely means Yehudah's son, synonymous with *mashiach.* That tribe is a fixture forever lighting Jewish firmaments; it is a dazzling and constant lodestar. The Sages' linking this verse to *mashiach ben* David puts an exclamation point on the overarching historic trend. It is a foregone conclusion that the supreme Jewish (and global) leader will descend from none other. 'And to him nations will gather.' The Gentiles will come, at the end of days, to serve *Melech HaMashiach.*[59]

Whether the scepter is raised in battle, in government, in court, in yeshiva study halls – Yehudah towers above the rest. Though not explicit and often out of history's limelight, his tribe is unmatched. Take it as axiomatic for the present times as well: where there is among Jews genuine righteousness, resourcefulness, talent, valor, capability – his cloth is likely cut from Yehudah.

Yaakov had more to say about Heaven's designate. 'His foal is tied to the vine, his young donkey is bound to the grape sapling. He launders his garments with wine, his clothes in grape blood. Redness of eyes from wine, whiteness of teeth from milk.' The patriarch foresaw a territory fertile with vineyards. Wine, like effervescent water, will flow forth. Bucolic splendor amidst roaming flocks and herds epitomize a land flowing with milk and honey. Moshe, too, predicted Yehudah's prolific success and capability.[60]

A leader, a king, a warrior – Yehudah is a man set apart. But more than anything else, he is always a loyal, dedicated brother to the Jewish Nation.[61]

57. Abravanel needed only to look at a mirror to provide a prime instance of this!
58. BT *Yoma* 26a
59. See *Tzephania* 3:9
60. *Devarim* 33:7
61. Ibid.

ZEVULUN

YISSACHAR

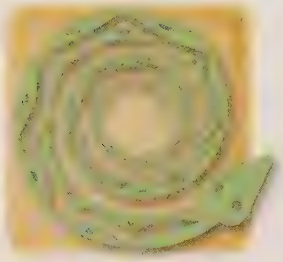
'**Zevulun** dwells by the sea's coast, a haven for ships; Tzidon is his border. **Yissachar** is a pack donkey who lies in field rows. And he saw that repose is good and that the land is pleasant. He lowered his shoulder to endure.' Zevulun and Yissachar, the last of Leah's sons, came next on Yisrael's list as sons not retained for the highest honors. Zevulun gets passed over because of his occupation in trade and business. Kings need to dedicate themselves fully to the public, and that leaves little time and energy to engage in outside pursuits. Not to mention the unseemliness of entrepreneurship for royalty. Moshe acknowledged their commercial acumen.[62]

Farming suits Yissachar well. Generously supporting the king through taxes, this tribe avoids warfare's tribulations, 'and became a servant to tribute.' Given its pacifism, it is self-evident that kingship hardly appears conceivable.

It could also very well be that Yisrael's blessing to Yissachar, as the Sages[63] explain, indicated a love and life of Torah study. Nevertheless, dedicated men prefer the rigors, stimulation, and challenges of yeshiva academies over military lifestyles. Some commentators explain the import of Yaakov's statement to Yissachar as a study in contrasts. Zevulun was inclined to battle enemies while Yissachar quickly acquiesced, preferring instead to pay hefty tributes.

Having run by all of Leah's sons, now Yisrael turned to the hand matrons' sons and assessed their chances at kingship.

62. *Devarim* 33:18
63. *Yoma* 26a



'**Dan** will judge his people as one of Israel's tribes.' Besides commander-in-chief, kings serve as judges and arbiters. Admirably, Dan met both of those qualifications. 'Dan shall be a roadside snake, an adder on the road, snipping at a horse's heels.' The problem was that he just did not have enough of the right stuff. Yisrael saw Dan as an exceptionally great, local leader but not as one equipped for the big leagues. A dependable lieutenant, he did not attain the rank of general. Likened to a feisty snake, with all the stealth to bite an unsuspecting horse's leg, Dan would not equal Yehuda the lion. Slow down an enemy army – yes. Stop them dead in their tracks and send them packing – no. Stout Shimshon descended from Dan and personified pluckiness. The discussion in *Sefer Shoftim* describes the wily leader as scrappy, incorrigible and uncanny.[64] Shimshon worked wonders at that time but his arena lacked breadth and depth. 'I seek your salvation, Hashem.' Yisrael set his sights on a Jewish king who could pull off major wins in head-on clashes.

A somewhat different reading of the verses plays Dan up with a pivotal role beautifully complementing Yehudah's. A roadside serpent coils in a manner that prevents its tail from being trampled by passersby, and lifts its head in vigil. In the desert, Dan brought up the rear[65] and admirably protected the Jews from deadly, rearguard enemy action. The tribe's vulnerable position, left to fend for itself with no help from its brethren traveling ahead, prompted frequent heartfelt supplication for Almighty succor. 'I hope for your salvation, Hashem.' At the end of Moshe's life, he blessed Dan, likening him to a lion, thus providing testimony to Dan's exceptional dedication and courageous performance for forty long desert years and beyond.[66] Nonetheless, his lair's depth lacks expanse.

64. *Shoftim* 14–16
65. *Bamidbar* 10:25
66. *Devarim* 33:22

Fifth *aliyah*

'Gad, raiders shall maraud him, and he attacks from the rear.'

GAD

Gad faced many hardships, culminating with this tribe's ignominy at being the first exiles prior to the First Temple's destruction.[67] Yisrael noted his weakness and inability to thwart the Ashurites' onslaught. Clearly, such a tribe is not a serious contender for the throne.

Perhaps Yaakov had not offered quite such low assessment of Gad. Read: 'Gad will have many family divisions, all banded together. At the end, they will be attacked.' Gad merited seven family clans,[68] more than any other tribe. They all dwelled together in Transjordan, unlike their northern neighbor Menasheh which was bisected. Gad would meet its sad end with all its families shunted to Ashur.

ASHER

'His [Gad's] bread is richer than that of **Asher**, and he will grant them regal delights.' Yisrael foresaw Asher's tribe's prime farm land in the Holy Land – a veritable breadbasket of cornucopia. An avid agriculturist and farmer, productive Asher never set his sights on rulership. His expertise in land husbandry won him blue-ribbon crops, making him an especially fit subject to the king. Like the salt of the earth, his contribution and hard-work ethic earned him wide praise.

NAFTALI

'**Naftali** is a dispatched gazelle, an able wordmeister.' The patriarch likened Naftali to a graceful hind, express-delivering messages across countries. This description attested to the tribe's loyalty within the national rubric. He could be counted on to give one thousand percent effort. As such, this tribe was, metaphorically, an ideal foot soldier in any mobilization. Moshe's blessing depicts the tribesmen as evoking full

67. *Divrei HaYamim* I 5:26
68. *Bamidbar* 26:15–17

satisfaction.[69] Talented speech writers and letter crafters are always welcome on the royal administration staff.

Reviewing Yaakov's tribal ordering thus far, philosophers might see Zevulun placed ahead of Yissachar since that better corresponds to pyramidal societal stratum. That is, secular values place shrewd merchants ahead of earthy agriculturalists. The Sages[70] give prominence to Zevulun on account of his financial support of studious Yissachar. Dan comes after Leah's children as the firstborn of the hand matrons, followed by Gad, Zilpah's eldest. Next comes Asher, Gad's younger full brother. Naftali, son of Bilhah, immediately precedes his mother's mistress' (Rachel's) children.

Yisrael completed his analysis of his sons born from Leah and the handmaids. A penetrating gaze turned to Yosef and Binyamin, his sons from his beloved wife Rachel. These verses are, perhaps, the hardest to decipher. '**Yosef** is a prolific son – a prolific son at a water spring' alludes to Menasheh and Efraim. The verse also refers to two of Yosef's trademark attributes.

Yosef

- *Will* Superhuman strength refused, nay defied, a paramour's lures. This remarkable achievement is recorded for posterity. Yosef was no eunuch, bereft of sexual desire. When he is called 'a prolific son', the Torah acknowledges his virility and masculinity. '…Maidens marched to marvel at him…his bow was mightily subdued' – Yosef kept his passions in check.
- *Magnanimity* Yosef achieved quality governmental machinery – the envy of the developed world. His munificence supported an entire, burgeoning family to the third generation. The 'prolific son at a water spring' alludes to a fruit-laden tree. '…Embittered archers fiercely attacked him.' Despite his brothers' deep animosity, generosity rebuffed their strife. In return, 'his arms were more golden than powerful

69. *Devarim* 33:23
70. *Tanchuma* Vaychi 11

> Yaakov's hands.[71] From there he supported the rock of Yisrael.' A Midas touch outshone his father's wealth, singlehandedly sustaining a stranded household. Perhaps 'the rock of Yisrael' refers to Yosef as a dependable provider.

Yosef's blessing parallels his achievements. '[Your reward will come] from your father's Almighty One and He will aid you. [Since you were with Hashem] He will bless you.' Yaakov promised his son Heavenly bounty on account of his supporting him in Goshen. 'Blessings of dew from heaven. Blessings from the depths of underground reservoirs.' Fertile fields forever flourishing.

Note a measure for measure compensation according to his son's toil. Impervious to inappropriate passes (*eshet* Potifar), Yosef elicited from his father guarantees for his children – a woman's fundamental fertility. 'Blessings of the breasts and of the womb.'

Lest the promise of progeny be considered but a quaint gesture in Yosef's eyes, the patriarch put things in perspective. 'The blessings of your father are superior to the blessings of my parents [to me]. [Theirs were] desires of the earth's hills.' This is in contrast to Yitzchak and Avraham's plenty that spoke exclusively in terms of dew and grain and fat of the land. Not so Yaakov. He cut to the essentials: Progeny. 'These [blessings] shall be upon Yosef's head, upon the pate of he who had been separated from his brothers.'

These verses also bear interpretation as Yaakov is alluding to Yosef as a son apart from the rest. 'Son of the glorious one is Yosef, she who was glorious to all her beholders. She strode as girls admired her' describes Yaakov's love and admiration for the strikingly exquisite Rachel. The union produced a noble son, Yosef. 'They made him an object of bitterness and shot arrows at him. Archers hated him.' His envious brothers took aim and shot their target, their brother.' But Yosef soundly defeated his brothers. '[Yosef's] bow was firmly placed, and his arms spread wide. [All this was] from the Mighty One of Yaakov, so that he could shepherd the [stranded] rock of Yisrael.'

Legitimately, one wonders why Yisrael did not pick Yosef's tribe to rule. Would he not be a natural choice? Had Yosef not passed every imaginable (and unimaginable) test? What could Yehudah possibly have over Yosef?

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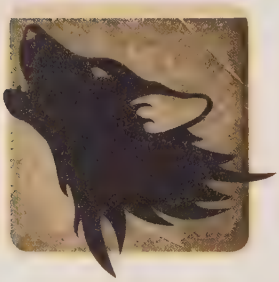
71. Alternatively: 'The Mighty One of Yaakov made his arms golden.'

Yisrael zeroed in on one thing. Kings cannot move alone; they require assistants and professionals in several different areas. Well-greased kingdoms rely on and delegate to loyal officers and staff. That needs a helmsman who fosters respect, love, and cooperation. Yehudah was such an individual. He, more than Yosef, nurtured family closeness that broke down dividing walls. True, Yosef mended broken fences. But it is also true that Yehudah rendered walls superfluous and disposed of them altogether. Yisrael saw to it that Yosef's tribe would enjoy every temporal blessing. But the kingship was reserved for Yehudah.

Although Yosef had already been split into two tribes, he was blessed by Yaakov as one of twelve. As a rule, when Levi is counted, the dozen tribes are enumerated with an Efraim-Menasheh merger.

Sixth *aliyah*

'Binyamin, a devouring wolf, eats booty in the morning and divides spoils in the evening.'



BINYAMIN

Lastly, Yisrael sized up his youngest son **Binyamin**, calling him 'a devouring wolf.' Wolves prowl and stalk prey day and night taking their fill of victims. While this pointed to Binyamin as a capable warrior, it also exposed a shortcoming. War spoils do not justify war, and need be viewed as no more than a residual benefit. A king's main motivation to mobilize soldiers and wage war concentrates on the honor and duty of protecting fellow countrymen and securing land from enemy threats. The forefather was making a veiled allusion to Shaul coveting Amalek's pulchritudinous livestock.[72] Since Moshe's blessing to the tribes focused on their respective roles in the Holy Land, he gushed over Binyamin whose coveted territory incorporated the *beit hamikdash*.

With these selective and didactic aspect of Yisrael's words concluded, the Torah moves on to a general assessment of the fledgling nation. Despite some sons receiving effusive praise and others hearing condemnation, 'all

72. *Shmuel* I 15:19

these compose the twelve tribes of Israel.' The offshoots of a mighty tree who was their father, they were all doughty boughs.

'And this is what their father spoke to them. He blessed them as well. Each man according to his blessing did he bless them.' For example Yaakov beseeched Hashem to erase Reuven's stain for his part in the Bilhah affair after chastising him about it. In this way, each tribe benefited from their father's perspicacity to make vital, crucial amends.

'And he commanded them and said to them: "I will be gathered to my people. Bury me with my forefathers in the *me'arah* that lies in Efron the Hittite's field."' Although his words appear redundant (as Yosef had given his solemn oath), it was an important assurance. What if Paroah objected to the release of his indispensable viceroy? Yisrael sought to obligate each and every one of his children.

Next, Yaakov reviewed and summarized the *me'arah* deal consummated over a century and a half earlier. 'In the *me'arah* inside the two-tiered field adjacent to Mamre in the Land of Canaan that Avraham purchased from Efron the Hittite for an eternal burial plot.' Fearing a seventeen year hiatus and absence from Canaan weakened their link, and possibly caused a rupture in his sons' knowledge of how Avraham laid legitimate deed and claim to Chevron, this refreshed their collective memory. Even if the link was not severed, there still remained a possibility that the locals or descendants of Efron encroached on Jewish rights and legacy. Yisrael wanted to emphasize the undisputed legality of the cave's proprietorship and its municipal sanction as a burial area.[73] 'There they buried Avraham and his wife Sarah; there they buried Yitzchak and his wife Rivkah and there I buried Leah.' He foresaw imposters, liars and cheats feeding Chevron twaddle for popular consumption. Specious claims advanced by distant family members would likely attempt to undermine the plain facts and plainer truths. Yaakov would not stand for it because his body and soul deserved to be buried next to his father and grandfather.

To the Yishmaelites, Yisrael noted that only Yitzchak merited burial there and to the descendants of Esav, he pointed out that only Yaakov and Leah had designated plots. Undisputed – that was the patriarch's exclusive claim. Hard evidence brooked no doubt especially when he told them about personally digging his own plot. Effectively, the patriarch explained that his sons should

73. See chapter five, second *aliyah*

never ever forget nor relinquish what Avraham had accomplished and what he had intended: the *me'arah* is exclusively Jewish. End of story. Period.

'And Yaakov finished his directive to his sons. He drew his legs back upon the bed. Exhaling for the last time, he was gathered to his people.' He had addressed his children from a seated position but with these last words, he reclined on his bed. The end came with no signs of pain, discomfort or bodily convulsion. Yaakov's death came with ease. It was as if he finished a conversation with a dear friend, and took leave. The third patriarch had died. The Torah only records Yosef hugging and kissing his deceased father.

Following the protocol associated with royal state dignitaries, 'Yosef requested his servants, the doctors, to embalm his father. And they embalmed Yisrael.' Ancient Egypt was quite adept at this posthumous practice that preserved corpses through the resectioning of several organs before internal and external oil injections and anointing. The process required days of preparations, resulting in the deceased appearing peaceful, as if soundly sleeping. Embalming delayed the putrefaction and decomposition associated with death as was the case when Yosef passed away and had been thus treated. Eventually all that remained was a skeleton, since the Torah attests that centuries later Moshe took out Yosef's bones.[74] Seemingly, basic embalming was a thirty day process but Yaakov's stature mandated especial treatment. That procedure prolonged his body care for forty additional days.

Abundantly expected, the loss and blow to the family was inestimable. *Bnei* Yisrael mourned the entire seventy days. 'And Egypt cried for seventy days.' Plausibly it means that the Jews in Egypt cried for that time period. Mourning for the patriarch was protracted. It began upon his death but the coming verses describe additional phases of grief and crying as the procession moved to Canaan, notably to Goren HaAtad.

The Torah utilizes peculiar language to teach about the patriarch passing away. The use of the verb 'expire' instead of the common verb 'died' prompted the Sages[75] to state that "Our father Yaakov never perished." Their explanation focuses on an indissoluble intertwining between the last patriarch and his descendants. Unlike Avraham, Yitzchak or any other prophet, something unique is being stated about Yaakov here and echoed by Yirmiyahu.[76] Yaakov

74. *Shmot* 13:19
75. BT *Taanit* 5b
76. *Yirmiyahu* 30:10

or Yisrael is forever the Jewish People's appellation. For that reason, Jews collectively are commonly called "Yisrael" or "Yaakov." No more fitting tribute can be imagined – a personal, indelible contribution to the Jewish Mystique.

'And the days of his crying passed and Yosef said to Paroah's household saying: "If I have found favor in your eyes, please speak to Paroah saying: 'My father administered an oath to me.' "' During the seventy day mourning period, Yosef did not permit himself to breathe a word about the burial plans, even to the palace courtiers. After that time passed,[77] strict protocol forbade Yosef or any minister to approach Paroah in a scruffy, saddened state (as mourners are wont) as this showed disrespect to the emperor. Paroah's household members were therefore enjoined to make the request on Yosef's behalf. They were to stress that while Yosef would participate in the delegation headed to Chevron, he would immediately return after the funeral. 'Now please let me go up and bury my father and return.'

Permission was granted to bury the patriarch in Chevron and Yosef was allowed to join its procession. Paroah was duly impressed that Yisrael and Yosef consummated their arrangement by use of a solemn oath. Trekking to Canaan became a momentous event as the escort contingent included not only the adult family members but Egyptian dignitaries as well. Paroah may have had ulterior motives for sending his men. Besides the king's desire to show his final respects, there was the overriding concern that the Jews would stay put in Canaan. He could not help but note that the Holy Land played a prominent part both in the patriarch's life and his burial. Likely, the Jews had vocalized a yearning to return home. Such a destabilizing eventuality gave Paroah pause which is why the womenfolk and children were prohibited from joining the funeral procession. Ominous, yet subtle warning signals from the Egyptian authorities did not bode well though few would dare imagine where this first discriminatory legislature might lead.

While preparing the procession, Yosef had anticipated a potential conflict with Esav's clan. He had reason to believe that the hallowed cave would prove a flashpoint thus prompting the Egyptian army's protection of the mourners. 'And chariots and horsemen went up with him and the encampment was very

77. It seems that the words in the original version of the Abravanel's text "אבל אחיהם אמרו" are an error and should read "אבל אחריהם אמר"

big.' An army presence prevented or at least it was hoped it would prevent things from getting too rowdy and out of hand.

As it turned out, Yosef assessed Esav's hostility correctly. Esav's grandson, General Tzepho attacked Commander Yosef in charge of Paroah's forces. Wily Tzepho was captured and brought down to Egypt in chains. Eventually he broke out of detention and fled to Italy. His story of ascension to power there changed history's course forever because he became the legendary founder of the Roman Empire. Fuller treatment of this fascinating episode can be found in *Yeshayahu*.[78]

'And they came to Goren HaAtad in Transjordan where they eulogized with an outpouring of panegyrics most moving and he made mourning for his father seven days.' The loved ones' difficulty in parting with Yaakov was apparent and manifest. Agony and tears followed the casket. Though impossible to compare the three patriarchs – each so unique and special – one wonders if Yaakov's passing and the lamentations for him did not mean that a bitter time had come. It was truly an end to a most glorious era.

'And the local Canaanites saw the mourning at Goren HaAtad and they said: "This is a monumental loss for Egypt."' Therefore it was called "Avel Mitzrayim" of Transjordan.' Standers-by observed a pronounced Egyptian presence and understandably erred to assume that their monarch had died. Plausibly, the Canaanites painted this event forebodingly for themselves. They even changed the town's name to "Egypt's Mourning" in hopes of deflecting the ominous occasion. Meaning – better this ill-portent attach itself to the Paraoh's kingdom and not to their own. Most importantly, these verses signal the patriarch's prominence. An outpouring of honor and last respects evidenced this.

'And his sons performed for him as he commanded.' In Canaan's Goren HaAtad, Yaakov's sons took hold, carrying the bier to Chevron. Some commentators[79] suggest that Yaakov was specific in this precept and that the twelve sons fell into the formation that would later provide a model for the Jews surrounding the *mishcan* during the desert generation. The twelve pallbearers took into account Efraim representing Yosef and Menasheh replacing Levi.

78. See *Yeshayahu* 35 and Abravanel ad loc.
79. *Rashi* and *Radak*

The last-minute forays by Esav's descendants fought Jewish hegemony over Chevron but were handily defeated and dispersed. 'And they buried him in the two-tiered field's *me'arah* that Avraham had purchased.' At long last Yaakov was buried next to Leah.

'And Yosef returned to Egypt, he and his brothers and all those who had come up with him to bury his father…after his burying of his father.' Note the procession details recorded in the Torah. While en route to bury Yaakov, Yosef and the brothers lagged behind the Egyptian entourage. 'And all of Paroah's servants came up with him, the elders of his household and all of Egypt's elders. And Yosef's entire family and his brothers and father's household.' This reflects the common practice of mourners staying back in a funeral procession. After the burial, Yosef and his brethren walked first, again in consonance with contemporary post-funeral custom.

'And Yosef's brothers saw that their father died and they said: "Hopefully Yosef will hate us. [Hopefully] he will pay us back the evil."' The scar of the sibling trauma, to be sure, healed but mended jaggedly. The brothers contemplated their new reality without Yaakov's stabilizing influence, and it frightened them. Sans parental chaperone, would Yosef unleash his fury and avenge past wrongs? The brothers eyed two scenarios. One, they preferred an open and overt display of odium so that they could mount a defense, open dialogue, or downright beg. The silent treatment might unnerve them. Two, in a curious calculation they welcomed Yosef's wrath as a stepping stone to success. Did not the raw treatment of Yosef catapult him to success in Egypt? Either way, the brothers schemed to push Yosef into showing his cards. They sought a mediator's help.

'And they commanded to (tell) Yosef saying: "Your father requested before his death saying. 'Thus say to Yosef. Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin, for they perpetrated evil against you.' And now please forgive the transgression of the servants of your father's Almighty."'

Trying to flush out Yosef's true feelings, the brothers fudged a script and solicited the mediator's help to approach Yosef. The scant message was basic: Yosef had a good reason to forget the past. The brothers needed to exhibit patience and forbearance. Did not blood bind them? Even if the stressed shared parents' bond snapped on account of Yosef's sale then another rationale remained valid. Their common values tied them. Did their souls not travel

together on Hashem's path of life? As written by the prophet Malachi 'Behold one father to us; behold One Almighty created us.'[80] A man has but two indissoluble companionships in the world: Brotherhood and religious fellowship.

The second part of the above quote ("Please forgive the transgression of the servants...") may have been the messenger, on his own initiative, adding another incentive for moving on. The brothers were merely serving as Hashem's actors. Hashem's guiding hand worked everything out in the end. This reiterated Yosef's earlier words and sentiments in *Parashat Vayigash*.[81]

The timing of the message took place immediately after Yaakov's burial in Chevron. The brothers calculated that if they got the cold shoulder or even remotely sensed danger, they would make a quick break and try their chances on the lam.[82]

'And Yosef cried in their speaking to him.' Speechless, Yosef's tears did the talking. 'And the brother also went and prostrated themselves before him. And they said: "Behold, we are your servants."' Uncomfortable with their gestured obeisance, he bid them stand. 'And Yosef said to them: "Do not be frightened. Am I Hashem's substitute?"'

For the umpteenth time Yosef explained how the entire episode was Divinely arranged. Heaven's script called for saving the family in face of famine's disaster; they must believe that this was Hashem's grand scheme. Yosef possessed absolutely zero divine might and like them was a participant, not an initiator, in the Creator's universe. As such he could neither do his brothers good nor harm. Heaven's hands turn the levers. If the brothers merely reviewed their own acts, they would internalize this. Had they not schemed evil yet no harm befell Yosef? 'And you planned to do me evil. Hashem calculated it for good to bring it to pass this day for sustaining a multitudinous people.'

80. *Malachi* 2:10
81. Chapter eleven, second and third *aliyot*
82. This is difficult to reconcile with the Abravanel's earlier comment that the tribes' families were kept behind. Perhaps they planned to smuggle them out later.

Seventh *aliyah*

'"And now do not fear. I will support you and your children." And he comforted them – speaking heart to heart.'

The brothers comprehended Yosef's function as chief supporter of the patriarch's family, a role performed gracefully. Speaking heart to heart, he pledged to care for all of their needs as long as he lived. Won over, his brothers abandoned their plans of staying in Canaan. 'And Yosef lived in Egypt, he and his father's household.'

The *parashah*'s denouement highlights the Jewish Story from Yosef's perspective. 'And Yosef lived one hundred and ten years.' Jewish life in Egypt experienced seventy one balmy years. There would be another twenty-two years until Levi, the last of Yaakov's sons, passed away at one hundred and thirty seven. This was followed by the lifespan of Kehat son of Levi, which extended for one hundred and twenty seven years post Levi's demise. The favorable and good years of Jewish sojourn in Egypt thus totaled two hundred and twenty years. One hundred and thirty years of Amram *ben* Kehat (Moshe's father) in addition to Moshe's eighty year mark yields two hundred and ten years of Jewish slavery. Adding the two epochs – happy years and tragic years – the Torah teaches that the entire exile spanned four hundred and thirty years.[83]

'And Yosef saw Efraim's third generation. Machir son of Menasheh's children were also born on Yosef's lap.' *Yiddishe nachas*. Yaakov's promise of additional progeny for Yosef[84] was fulfilled.

Time's passage, Yosef knew from his father, was a ticking bomb for the family. If not these, certainly these babies' grandchildren would be subject to savagery and sadistic Egyptian bondage. It was so decreed. If this *parashah*'s near last words were conciliatory and graceful, the very last words uttered encapsulated, perhaps, more.

'And Yosef said to his brothers: "I am dying. But the Almighty will certainly remember you and bring you up from this land to the land that was sworn to Avraham, and to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov." And Yosef made *Bnei*

83. *Shmot* 12:40. The precise duration of the Egyptian exile is a matter of discussion due to contradictory verses on the matter. For a full discussion see Abravanel to *Shmot* 12:21 and to *Yechezkel* Perek 4.

84. First *aliyah* above

Yisrael solemnly swear saying: "The Almighty will remember you. And you shall carry my bones from this [place]."'

The belief in Redemption. Is it not a cornerstone of Jewish faith?

Yosef's instructive message was the deepest of all. Yes, he would die and Yaakov's descendants would be left to fend for themselves. Buoying their spirits, Yosef spoke of future redemption. His ancient, desiccated bones would make their way back to the Holy Land aloft Jewish shoulders that kept a promise close, ever so tight.

'And Yosef died at one hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, placing him in a coffin in Egypt.'

Yaakov and Yosef left many legacies, one of which was a yearning for burial in Israel. The Sages[85] discuss the importance of it, pointing out that the revival of the dead occurs in Israel.[86] Others[87] decry the practice of burying in the Holy Land when the deceased had not resided there just prior to passing. They teach that it is patently offensive to fulfill such requests. Given that latter approach, how does a reader reconcile Yaakov and Yosef's directive? The answer is that the Sages contemplated different types of Jews.

Yaakov and Yosef were two righteous men who lived a life predicated on adhering to Hashem's ideals and commandments. Furthermore, their deepest meditations and yearnings set their sight on Israel. The broad rabbinic protest never contemplated their circumstances. Rather, the Sages vehemently objected to people mistakenly thinking that a life devoid of Torah, or of rejecting the Holy Land, could somehow be erased and forgiven if these transgressors were buried in Israel.

Note that Yosef did not request burial in Chevron. According to tradition, Yosef was, in fact, aware that only the three patriarchs and three matriarchs merited *me'arah* interment. It could also be that Yosef knew that the place could not fit all of the twelve tribes plus their wives. That being so, Yosef did not want to draw special attention to himself.[88] Reason dictated not asking for immediate burial in Canaan because it was clear that such a request would be

85. *Bereshit Rabbah* 96:5
86. See *Yechezkel* 37:12
87. *Bereshit Rabbah* loc cit
88. Abravanel seemingly overlooks the most obvious reason. Yaakov had told Yosef that he was to be buried in Shechem (third *aliyah* above)!

summarily denied. Doubtlessly Paroah would insist on honoring his viceroy's memory with a state ceremony and funeral.

Yosef's epitaph bespoke volumes. At the age of thirty he rose to power and died eighty years later in office. Arduously, chroniclers will search tomes and bookshelves long and hard to find record of a man like Yosef – simply futile. History has not provided mankind with another such person who singlehandedly ran an empire for eight straight decades with Yosef's integrity, benevolence, and brilliance – simply unrivaled.

So ends *Bereshit*: The Book of Creation. *Ex nihilo*, the stage has been set for civilization's central theme: The Nation of Israel.

GLOSSARY

Akedah	lit. "binding"; generally refers to the Mt. Moriah narrative in *Vayera*
Aliyah	lit. "going up"; generally refers to being called up to read from the Torah, or any other standard segment allotted to the person called up.
Aliyot	plural of *aliyah*
Aluf	chieftain
Amos	the third of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Aron	the ark that housed Moses' tablets
Bamidbar	The Book of Numbers
Bascherte (Yid.)	lit. predestined, generally refers to a destined spouse
Bavel	Babylon
Beit HaMikdash	the Temple in Jerusalem
Bereshit	the Book of Genesis
B'ezrat Hashem	with the help of G-d
Bnei	sons of
Brit Milah	the religious rite of circumcision
Chatan	bridegroom
Chayei Sarah	lit. "the life of Sarah"; the fifth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Chazal	an acronym for "Our Sages of blessed memory" – the Sages of the Mishnaic and Talmudic era
Cheshvan	the eighth month in the Jewish calendar
Chumash	the Five Books of Moses (Pentateuch)
Chuppah	bridal canopy
Daniyel	(The Book of) Daniel
Davened (Yid.)	prayed
Davka	in particular
Devarim	the Book of Deuteronomy

Divrei HaYamim	the (Biblical) Book of Chronicles
Drush	homiletic interpretation
Eichah	the Book of Lamentations
Efes	zero
Elul	the sixth month of the Jewish calendar
Eshet	wife of …
Fressed (Yid. colloq.)	ate gluttonously
Gehinnom	hell
Gelt (Yid.)	money
Geonic	of the *Geonim*
Geonim	the heads of Babylonian Academies from late 6th to mid-11th centuries
Geulah	redemption
Gornisht (Yid.)	nothing
Govah ha'enayim	lit. at eye level. A school of Biblical interpretation that purports viewing Biblical figures as possessing a full array of contemporary foibles
Halachah	Jewish law
Halachic	according to Jewish law
HaMelech	the King
HaNavi	the prophet
Hashem	lit. "The Name"; G-d
Hashkafah	weltanschauung; outlook
HaSofer	the scribe (generally refers to Ezra)
Hoshea	the first of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Iyyar	the second month of the Jewish calendar
Iyyov	(the Book of) Job
Kaputte (Yid.)	traditional long coat
Kavanah	concentration; intent

Ketuvim	the Writings, the third of three sections of *Tanach* (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemia, Chronicles)
Kibbitzing (Yid.)	making small talk
Kohelet	the Book of Ecclesiastes
Kohen (pl. Kohanim)	a member of the Jewish priestly caste
Laffa	Arabic flat bread
Lech Lecha	lit. "go for yourself"; the third of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Levayah	funeral
Leviim	descendants of Jacob's son Levi; a caste dedicated to Temple service in secondary roles not reserved for *Kohanim*
Liebling (Yid.)	lit. beloved one; a child who is doted upon
Lingua sancta (Lat.)	holy tongue
Litvish (Yid.)	characteristic of people of Lithuanian origin.
Malachi	the twelfth of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Malachim	angels
Mamzer(im)	"bastard." In *Halachic* parlance the term refers to children born of adulterous or illicit incestuous unions (pl.)
Mamzerut	*mamzer* status
Matzot	unleavened bread; especially eaten on Passover
Mazal	luck
Melachim	the Book of Kings
Melech HaMashiach	Messiah
Mentschlichkeit (Yid.)	decency
Mezuzah	Scripture scroll affixed to doorpost
Michah	the sixth of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Middot	lit. dimensions; character traits
Midrash(im)	homiletic interpretation of Scripture (pl.)
Mikdash	Temple
Miketz	lit. "at the end of"; the tenth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Minyan	a quorum of ten adult male Jews

Mishcan	The Tabernacle constructed by the Jewish Nation in the Sinai desert, a precursor to the *Beit HaMikdash*
Mishlei	the Book of Proverbs
Mishnaic	of the Mishnah – the preliminary basic Oral Law text
Mohel	one who performs a circumcision
Mon frère (Fr.)	my brother
Mufkeret	loose woman
Mukhtar (Ara.)	town or village mayor
Mussar	ethics
Narishkeit (Yid.)	foolishness
Nefesh	soul
Neviim	Prophets; The second of the three sections of *Tanach* (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Twelve Prophets)
Nisan	the first month of the Jewish calendar
Noach	the second of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Ovadyah	the fourth of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Parashah	section; chapter; weekly portion of the *Chumash*
Parashat	weekly portion of …
Pardes	lit. orchard; often refers to an acronym of the four methods of Biblical interpretation: plain, symbolic, homiletic and esoteric
Pareve (Yid.)	neutral; often used to describe kosher foods that contain neither meat nor dairy
Parnassah	livelihood
Parshiyot	plural of *Parashah*
Passuk	Biblical verse
Perutzah	wench
Pirkei Avot	"Ethics of Our Fathers." The Mishnah tractate that addresses proper ethics and mores
Protekzia	political connections
Pshat	straightforward meaning or interpretation

Rabbeim	rabbinic mentors
Rebbe	rabbinic mentor
Rishon (pl. Rishonim)	a figure of Torah authority of roughly 1000–1500 CE
Roshei Yeshiva	heads of a Talmudic institution
Rut	the Book of Ruth
Sabba	grandfather
Sanctum sanctorum (Lat.)	Holy of Holies; the innermost chamber of the Temple
Sanhedrin	the High Court
Schlumper(s) (Yid.)	ne'er do well (pl.)
Schnorrer(s) (Yid.)	alms collector (pl.)
Schtick (Yid.)	shenanigans
Sechalim Nivdalim	abstract intelligences, higher beings of existence
Sefer	book
Shabbat	the Jewish Sabbath or day of rest
Shidduch	an arranged marriage
Shmot	the Book of Exodus
Shmuel	(the Book of) Samuel
Shoah	holocaust
Shoftim	the Book of Judges
Spatzier (Yid.)	stroll
Taharah	ritual purification or purity
Tahor	pure
Tammuz	the fourth month of the Jewish calendar
Tanach	Acronym for Torah, *Neviim* and *Ketuvim*. The Jewish Bible
Tanna	Sage of the *Mishnaic* period
Tefillah	prayer
Tehillim	the Book of Psalms
Teraphim	idols
Teshuvah	repentance
Tishrei	the seventh month of the Jewish calendar
Toldot	lit. 'offspring'; the sixth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*

Trei Asar	the Book of Twelve (Minor Prophets)
Treif	not kosher
Tzaddik	a righteous person
Tzitzit	fringes attached to four cornered garments
Vaychi	lit. "and he lived"; the twelfth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Vayera	lit. "and he appeared"; the fourth of the weekly portions of
Vayeshev	lit. "and he settled"; the ninth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Vayetze	lit. "and he departed"; the seventh of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Vayigash	lit. "and he approached"; the eleventh of the weekly portions of
Vayikra	the Book of Leviticus
Vayishlach	lit. "and he sent"; the eighth of the weekly portions of *Bereshit*
Vilda Chaya (Yid. colloq.)	an uncouth person
Wadi (Arabic)	valley; dry riverbed
Yechezkel	(the Book of) Ezekiel
Yehoshua	(the Book of) Joshua
Yenta(s) (Yid. colloq.)	busybody (pl.)
Yeshayahu	(the Book of) Isaiah
Yiddishe nachas (Yid.)	lit. Jewish delight, especially from one's offspring
Yirmiyahu	(the Book of) Jeremiah
Yishar koach	"More power to you." Kudos.
Yoledet	postpartum mother
Yonah	the fifth of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Zecharyah	the eleventh of the minor prophets in the Book of *Trei Asar*
Zonah	prostitute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating college in 1977 with a B.A. in English Literature and a stint in the family business in California, Zev Bar Eitan married Judy and moved to Israel in 1981. He learned in yeshivot and kollelim in Los Angeles and Jerusalem, serving with a reserve IDF artillery unit from 1985 until his 1996 honorable discharge.

In 1988 Bar Eitan received ordination from Rav Yisrael Shurin, a son-in-law of Maran HaGaon Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky זצ"ל. Rav Shurin זצ"ל was a popular author, public speaker, OU *mashgiach kashrut* as well as a beloved congregational rabbi in New York and Efrat, Israel.

For more than twenty years, Bar Eitan has been teaching general Jewish Studies in Kollel Magen Avraham, an adult education program in Efrat. In addition to teaching *Tanach* and *Mishnah*, he currently delivers a lecture series on Abravanel's themes, incorporating elements from all of his *Tanach* commentary. Researching and writing this *sefer* has been, ברוך השם, his passion and wonderful preoccupation. He is now writing Abravanel's World of Torah for Sefer Shmot and Sefer Vayikra.

Zev & Judy; Shalom Aryeh, Chani & their son Nadav Yisrael; Elkana, Ayala & their daughter Molly Elka; Asher Mayer and Ligil, Yosef, Hanna, and Binyamin שיח' all live in *Eretz* Yisrael. May we, together with *Clal Yisrael*, merit to devote our lives to Torah and *mitzvot*, witnessing ביאת המשיח במהרה בימינו.

אמן וכן יהיה רצון

ת.ו.ש.ל.ב.ע.

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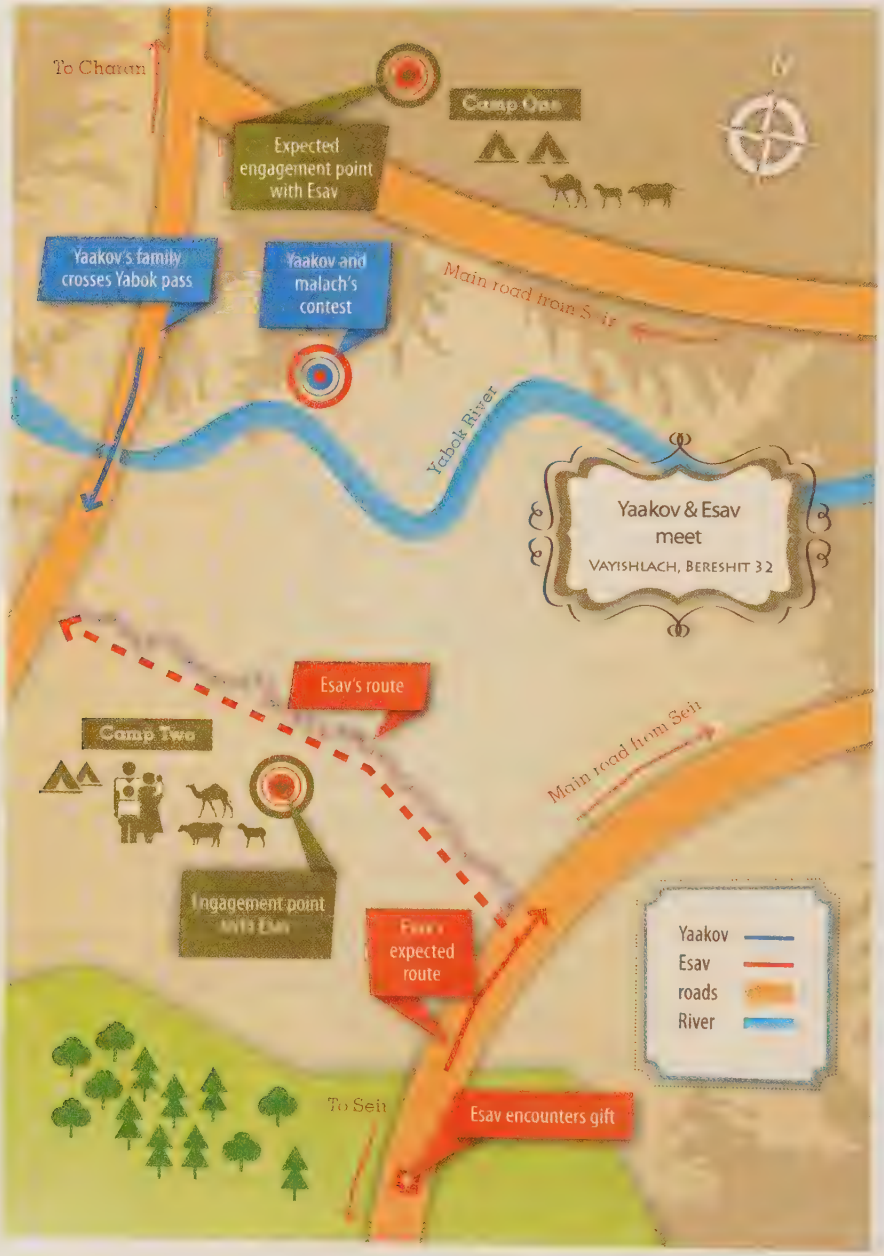
MAP OF YAAKOV-ESAV ENCOUNTER



Reference Point: Yaakov is travelling from Charan in the north to Canaan in the south.

Assumption 1: Yaakov believes that Esav's brigade will take main, presumed Mt. Seir wide highway nothbound towards Charan.

Assumption 2: Esav's actual route was narrower, and in general, an unusual East/West pass (perhaps wily typography).

1 = Yaakov and his entire encampment arrive north of Yabok. He gives orders for Company 'A' consisting of shock troops and chattel to entrench.

2 = Yaakov mobilizes and transfers 'Company B' (wives, children and chattel) from northern Yabok embankment to a southern salient.

3 = After family evacuation (Company 'B'), Yaakov remained – alone – north of Yabuk bluff to make final inspection.

4 = Battle of Midway: Yaakov and malach duel between companies 'A' and 'B' positions.

(Continued from front flap)

Bar Eitan's zest for Abravanel's masterpiece began when he started teaching Tanach. As a new teacher, he hoped that the small-print, double-columned pages would provide some deeper textual insight. Lightly annotated with practically no typical sentence, paragraph or page structure, the available edition had a frugal feel to it. But Bar Eitan soon realized that this sefer was different than other commentaries he utilized when preparing for classes. Very different.

Abravanel is not merely a commentary; he is an encyclopedia. Extraordinarily gifted with rare intellectual acumen, this master expositor approaches Torah with reason. Clearly graced with good-heartedness, he writes with feeling. Blessed with a scientist's curiosity, he writes with expanse. A fervent scion of Davidic dynasty, he writes with reverence.

This sefer is for those interested in embarking on a journey. The pages that follow are a structured interpretation of Abravanel's Bereshit. An excellent guide and companion to the original, the reader delves into a world of Torah—page by page. Biblical narratives read like a novel and mini-essays impart sensible guidelines for approaching Man's biggest existential questions.

Indeed, Abravanel was a multifaceted personality of many questions. Fortunately for students of Bible, he was a deeply reflective and remarkable scholar who provided compelling, thought-provoking and enduring answers.

Photo Courtesy of Chaim Snow

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